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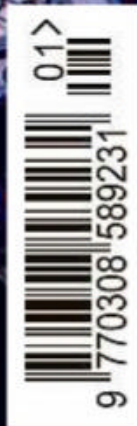
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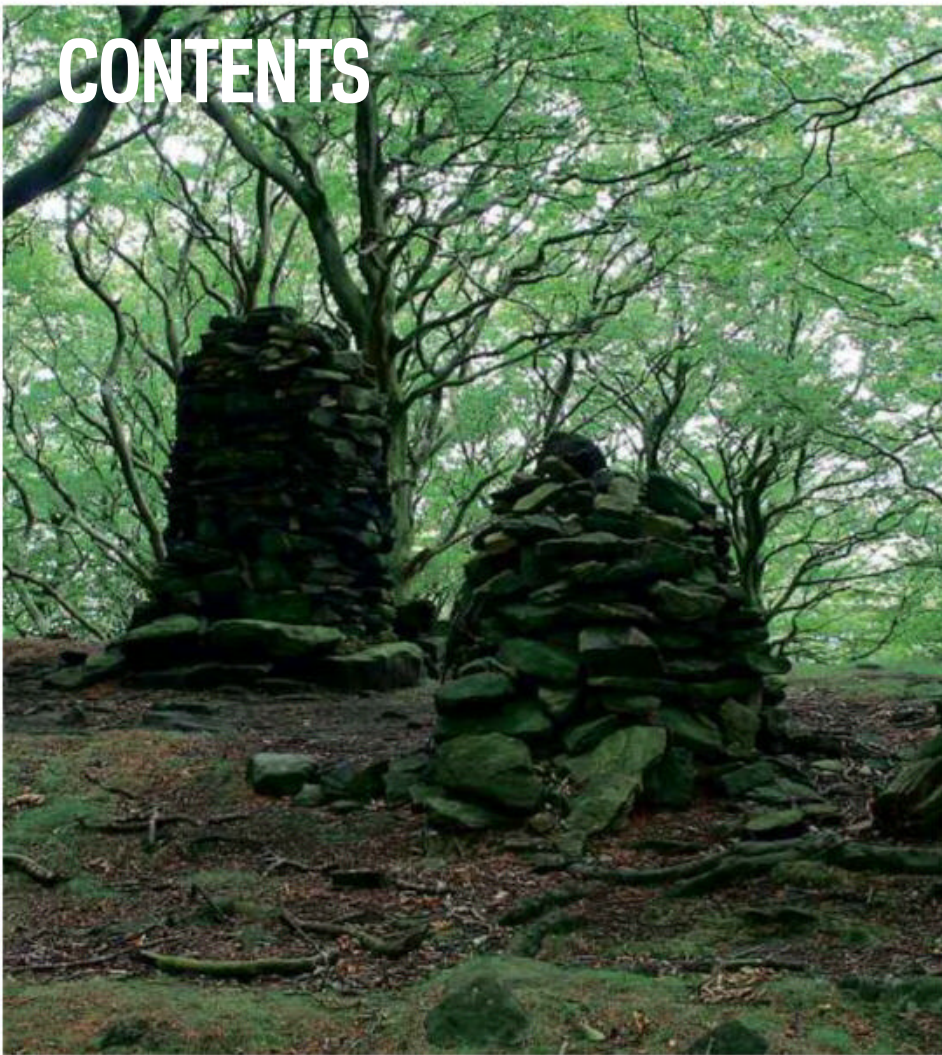
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DAVE PICKERSGILL

38 *Uncanny experiences in England's woods and forests*



PAN SONGANG / VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

22 *Return of the Black Death*




DAVID CLARKE

74 *The Giant Rock contactees*



54 *The real-life horrors behind The Lighthouse*

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FORTEAN TIMES 388

Why *fortean* ?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE
78

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Trigger-happy dogs, Thai UFO seekers, Finnish ice eggs, weird sex, and much more...

- | | | | |
|----|------------------|----|-----------------|
| 12 | ARCHÆOLOGY | 23 | MYTHCONCEPTIONS |
| 14 | CLASSICAL CORNER | 26 | ALIEN ZOO |
| 18 | GHOSTWATCH | 30 | THE UFO FILES |

FEATURES

18 COVER STORY THE GHOSTS OF THE CECIL HOTEL

ALAN MURDIE investigates a haunted hotel on the mean streets of downtown Los Angeles

32 SHOWERS OF STONES

DR KAREN STOLLZNOW looks back at the case of the Guyra Ghost, the stone-throwing spook that became a 1920s newspaper sensation and Australia's most famous poltergeist

38 UNCANNY EXPERIENCES IN ENGLISH WOODS

PETER A McCUE scrutinises reports of strange experiences in the woods and forests of England – from motorists seeing strange lights to campers encountering Bigfoot-like monsters.

46 FROM DOMINANTS TO THE DAMNED

IAN JAMES KIDD provides a new look at Charles Fort's work by placing it within the philosophical context of its era

REPORTS

16 NO SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Folklore and the blues in Memphis CAROLYN WAUDBY

74 FORTEAN TRAVELLER

Going 'out there' in SoCal DAVID CLARKE

FORUM

53 The Drewstown mystery RICHARD FREEMAN

54 To the lighthouse RIK WORTH

REGULARS

- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|----|-------------|----|----------------|
| 02 | EDITORIAL | 69 | LETTERS | 79 | PHENOMENOMIX |
| 59 | REVIEWS | 78 | READER INFO | 80 | STRANGE DEATHS |

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
(drsutton@forteantimes.com)
FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (FT-bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
(etienne@forteantimes.com)

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
DAVID V BARRETT
(dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON

RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES AND BACK ISSUES
www.managemymags.co.uk
customercare@subscribe.forteantimes.com

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Other overseas subscriptions: +44 (0)330 333 9492

LICENSING & SYNDICATION
FORTEAN TIMES IS AVAILABLE FOR
INTERNATIONAL LICENSING AND SYNDICATION – CONTACT:
Syndication Manager
RYAN CHAMBERS TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 4027
ryan_chambers@dennis.co.uk
Senior Licensing Manager
CARLOTTA SERANTONI TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3840
carlotta_serantoni@dennis.co.uk
Licensing & Syndication Executive
NICOLE ADAMS TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3998
nicole_adams@dennis.co.uk

FT ON THE INTERNET
www.forteantimes.com / www.facebook.com/forteantimes



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PUBLISHER
DHARMESH MISTRY
dharmesh_mistry@
dennis.co.uk

dennis.co.uk

CIRCULATION MANAGER
JAMES MANGAN
james.mangan@
seymour.co.uk

**GROUP ADVERTISING
DIRECTOR LIFESTYLE**
ANDREA MASON
020 3890 3814
andrea_mason@
dennis.co.uk

**EXPORT CIRCULATION
MANAGER**
GERALDINE GROBLER
geraldine.grobler@
seymour.co.uk

ACCOUNT MANAGER
IMOGEN WILLIAMS
020 3890 3739
imogen_williams@
dennis.co.uk

**CREATIVE REPRO
ARTWORKER**
FRANCESCA CINQUEPALMI
francesca_cinquepalmi@

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR
JENNIFER BRYAN
020 3890 3744

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

GOODBYE AND HELLO

Welcome to our first issue of the year, in which we start 2020 with a typically eclectic array of carefully curated curiosities. In our cover story, the indefatigable Alan Murdie finds himself in what is reputedly the most haunted hotel in Los Angeles; the Cecil has certainly enjoyed more than its fair share of unexplained deaths and tragic suicides – so much so that it was an inspiration for the fifth season of the popular series *American Horror Story*, in which vampire fashionista Lady Gaga preside over the Hotel Cortez, similarly located in downtown LA. There are more spooky goings-on from Australia – Karen Stollznow looks



back at the notorious poltergeist case of the Guyra Ghost – and the UK, where Peter McCue examines claims of uncanny experiences in England's woodlands. And we conclude our centenary celebration of *The Book of the Damned* as Ian James Kidd gets to grips with what he describes as Fort's metaphysics through an examination of the text's philosophical context and underpinnings. We also take side-trips to Memphis in search of the folklore of the Delta Blues and to the contactee country of Southern California. All that plus a penis fish invasion, a giant eel mystery, and some trigger-happy dogs. Happy New Year!

A DEPARTURE AND SOME ARRIVALS

This new year also brings some changes to the *FT* team. We're extremely sad to be saying goodbye to Val Stevenson, our book reviews editor extraordinaire, who after 20 years on the job has decided to hang up her red pencil. Val joined the good ship *FT* nearly two decades ago (we can't remember if she was press-ganged aboard or enlisted of her own free will), taking over as Chief Sub Editor in the summer of 2000 and helping us navigate through the choppy waters of change. In 2002, with issue 155, Val also took on the duties of Reviews Editor, and over the next few years, particularly as we saw an increase in our pagination and frequency, she transformed

the book reviews section from what sometimes seemed a bit of an afterthought to a professional and integral component of the magazine. Val built relationships with publishers, recruited and nurtured

excellent reviewers, and employed her keen editorial eye to make the reviews pages something to be proud of. It's telling that, these days, many people will say that it's the first section they turn to when a new issue arrives – and that's entirely down to Val's heroic efforts over the years. While we'll certainly miss her, I'm sure you'll agree that she really does deserve a break from relentless deadlines, late copy and emergency review-writing, and join us in

wishing her well for the future.

Taking over from Val as Book Reviews Editor is David V Barrett, who will be familiar to many readers as a regular *FT* contributor and reviewer of many years' standing. We're sure he'll bring exactly the right mixture of editorial know-how and fortean erudition to the job.

And, with next issue, we'll be welcoming another new addition to the team, as Christopher Josiffe takes on the newly-created role of News Editor. Our co-founding editor, Paul Sieveking, has been doing the heavy lifting in our news department ever since he joined *FT* in the late-1970s – he will be sharing some memories and highlights from this long and storied career in weird news-gathering next issue – and has decided that it's time to hand over this exhausting role to Chris, who has been writing features and news material for us for some time now. Paul will still be handling the letters section – so keep sending your correspondence to him – archaeological news and other fortean bits, as well as proofreading every issue; but we hope he gets to enjoy a bit more downtime from now on...

DAVID R. SUTTON

BOB RICKARD

PAUL SIEVEKING

“ELEGANTLY WRITTEN, BALANCING ON THE
LINE THAT DIVIDES PROSE FROM POETRY.”




BOOKLIST, ON THE BEAUTY

“ELEGANTLY CHILLING” M.R. CAREY, *on The Beauty*

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

STRANDINGS AND DEAD STARLINGS

The end of 2019 was marked by a strange stranding in California and a mass bird death in Wales

INVASION OF THE PENIS FISH

On 6 December, thousands of pulsating, fat innkeeper worms (*Urechis caupo*), about 10in (25cm) long, washed up on Drakes Beach, about 50 miles (80km) north of San Francisco. Although a worm, they are widely referred to as “penis fish” (can’t think why). Their innkeeper moniker comes from their tunnels, which other creatures use for accommodation. They are a type of spoonworm (*Echiuroidea*), an order of non-segmented marine worms identified by a spatula-shaped proboscis used for feeding and sometimes grasping or swimming. *U. caupo* is the sole representative in North America, found only from southern Oregon to Baja, with the bulk of sightings between Bodega Bay and Monterey.

The fat innkeeper is perfectly shaped for a life spent underground. Within a beach or mudflat, it digs a U-shaped burrow extending a few feet but no wider than the worm itself. The burrow’s front entrance pokes up like a little sand chimney. These can be seen clustered around the low tide line of a mudflat or sandy beach. The backdoor is marked by a pile of worm castings, which get projected out the end of the tunnel with a blast of water from the worm’s hindquarters. While they normally bury themselves deep in the sand, those on Drakes Beach were uprooted by storms.

There is fossil evidence of the creatures dating back 300 million years – and some live for up to 25 years. Penis fish are



ABOVE: Thousands of ‘penis-fish’ – in fact, fat innkeeper worms – washed ashore at Drakes Beach, California, in December.

eaten by several other creatures, including sharks, otters – and us. *Urechis unicinctus*, the species found in East Asia, is a delicacy in countries including South Korea. *baynature.org*, 10 Dec; *BBC News*, 13 Dec 2019.

STARLING APOCALYPSE

On the afternoon of Tuesday, 10 December, Hannah Stevens was on her way to see the doctor in Bodedern, Anglesey, North Wales. Near Llyn Llywenan, she saw a “massive flock” of starlings – a murmuration – flying overhead before landing and appearing to eat something in the narrow lane. On her way back at about 3.40pm, she found

the birds lying dead all along the road. Dafydd Edwards (41), her partner, went to see for himself and filmed the macabre scene. “There’s easily more than 300 of them,” he said. “I counted 150 last night but I gave up as there’s just hundreds of them littered everywhere. It’s as if they just dropped down dead from the sky.” The police counted around 225 in the road with many more scattered in the hedges – but, strangely, none at all in the fields either side of the road. The Animal and Plant Health Agency collected specimens for post mortem examination. Rob Taylor, Team Manager for North Wales Police’s Rural Crime

Team, said the deaths were “an absolute and complete mystery”, adding: “We’re hearing one story that it happened in exactly the same place many, many years ago so we’re just trying to confirm that.” *dailypost.co.uk*, *BBC News*, 11 Dec 2019.

For unexplained mass starling deaths in the Netherlands a year ago (November 2018), see **FT375:22**. *Fortean Times* has been reporting odd avian fatalities since the mass plummet of pelicans over Texas on 13 April 1974 [**FT6:15**]. For the most recent ‘Aflockalypse Now!’ events, see **FT206:9**, **221:20**, **225:20**, **274:20**, **286:10**, **347:10**.



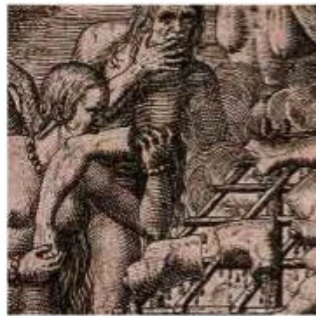
KATE MONTANA / NATURALIST



THAILAND'S UFO GROUPS

Skywatching
under the gaze
of the Buddha

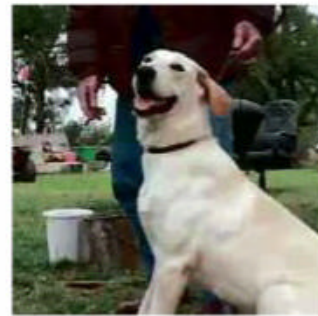
PAGE 8



CANNIBAL COMEBACK

Is it time to lift
the taboo on
eating people?

PAGE 23



ANIMALS FIGHT BACK

Gun-toting dogs
and kamikaze
slugs

PAGE 28

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

NOEL ROONEY ponders the accusations against Prince Andrew, fake 'fake news' (or was it?) and the difference between 'untrue' and 'true' conspiracy theories...

XMAS SHUFFLE

An eerie tweet from the young woman at the centre of allegations about Prince Andrew and his activities in the company of one Jeffrey Epstein, very publicly deceased, has stirred a lot of activity in the Conspirasphere. Virginia Roberts (now Virginia Giuffre) tweeted that "in no way, shape or form am I suicidal" and that "too many evil people want to see me quieted" [sic]. Reaction to the tweet was swift, and centred, predictably, on speculation that some agency or other (more or less every three-letter agency in the USA has been mentioned, along with MI6 wet teams and the SAS) was planning to off her before she could make her allegations in a court of law.

It is tempting to think that Ms Roberts is responding to the viral meme ('Epstein didn't kill himself') that is still doing the rounds; tempting and comforting. There is as yet no concrete evidence that she has been directly threatened by mysterious strangers or members of the aforesaid three-letter agencies, but if anything were to happen to her, it's likely the eruption will resonate well beyond the regular conspiracist communities. The Epstein affair is a conspiracy theory that has gone comprehensively mainstream; I have seen the meme posted and tweeted by people who are adamantly sceptical of conspiracy theories; but then, in a year when the most frequent 'what is' query on Google was 'Area 51', it's becoming difficult to see any clear boundaries between the Conspirasphere and the world at large.

A small detail in Ms Roberts's story about the prodigal prince has evoked some amusement to temper the atmosphere of threat. She claimed that Prince Andrew took her to a room in Epstein's island mansion and she was "forced to do for him what [she] did for Jeffrey". The experience was allegedly brief and somewhat cursory, and her abiding memory of it was the rogue royal sweating profusely. Sources close to HRH

have since rebuffed the claim, and thus the whole allegation, by stating that, after his experiences in the Falklands War, Prince Andrew was left with a rare condition which makes him unable to sweat at all. Given the circumstances he finds himself in, this inability may be something of an advantage.

Meanwhile, the UK election turned up its very own conspiracy theory. A photograph of a young boy, Jack Williment, nestled in blankets on the floor of a hospital in Leeds due to lack of bed space, went viral as a symbol of the NHS, under threat from lack of resources and a potential victim of Brexit. The following day, a post appeared on Facebook claiming that the image was fake news. The post allegedly came from a nurse, who was told by a nurse at the hospital in question that the photo had been staged. She has since denied being the original sender of the post, claiming initially that her account had been hacked, and subsequently that she had merely shared the post after seeing it elsewhere.

The fake news claim was shared, tweeted and shunted around the æther by a number of public figures and organisations, including at least one prominent former Labour politician, and had as much traction as the original image. The hospital made it clear that the story was genuine, but the row continued to simmer, and, although unlikely to have been pivotal in the outcome of the election, the photo may yet turn out to be the abiding image of the campaign. More to the point, this was a conspiracist story that played out entirely in the mainstream. The headline from iNews was intriguing, calling the affair an "untrue conspiracy theory", thus begging the question of what it considers a 'true' one: 'Epstein didn't kill himself', perhaps?

www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7779829/Virginia-Roberts-posts-chilling-Twitter-message-claiming-I-m-not-suicidal.html; inews.co.uk/news/leeds-hospital-photo-boy-floor-staged-conspiracy-twitter-fake-good-friend-1337258

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SHOES ARE TO BLAME FOR RUNNING LATE

Metro, 14 Aug 2019.

Hundreds speak with one voice

Toronto Star, 8 Mar 2019.

GRANNY WHO TOLD GRANDKIDS ABOUT FEEDING CORPSES TO PIGS ARRESTED AFTER THIRD HUSBAND'S SCALP IS FOUND

Metro, 1 May 2019.

Bats must leave the belfry to fulfil their missionary roles

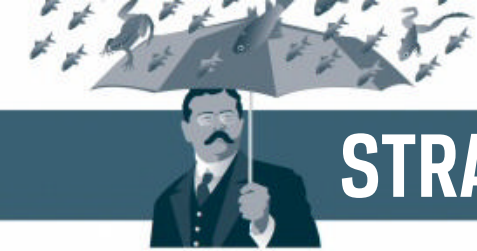
D.Telegraph, 6 July 2019.

SURFING CROCODILE SHUTS POPULAR TOURIST BEACH

Adelaide Advertiser, 20 July 2019

Florida vacation home invaded by vomiting vultures

Associated Press, 16 Aug 2019.



SIDELINES...

SHAMAN BUSTED

Alexander Gabyshev became a shaman while living in the woods after his wife's death. Last March he began a 4,500-mile (7,240km) walk from Yakutia, eastern Siberia, to Moscow, to exorcise Russia's dark spirits and cast out the "demon" Putin. On 19 September he was arrested following a raid on his camp by Lake Baikal. <i>D.Telegraph, 20 Sept 2019.

MIRACLE EXAMINED

Kazik Stepan was diagnosed with an inoperable tumour on his spinal cord, but after bathing in the water at Lourdes in 1965 he could walk for the first time in months. Now 71, he returned to Lourdes last September to have his 'miracle' verified by the International Medical Committee of Lourdes. <i>D.Mail, D.Telegraph, 7 Sept 2019.

THEIR LIPS ARE SEALED

No one in Iranian mass media dare mention the first name of Greece's Conservative prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. 'Kyr' is Persian for penis; 'ia' means or; and 'kos' is Persian slang for c**t. The name derives from Saint Cyriacus the Anchorite who lived in Corinth in the sixth century. <i>greece.greekreporter.com, 2 Sept 2019.

GIVING A CAMEL THE HUMP

When a woman entered a camel's enclosure at a Louisiana truck stop to retrieve her dog, the 43-stone camel sat on her, so she bit its testicles to escape being crushed to death. She was charged with criminal trespass. <i>Sunday Mirror, 29 Sept 2019.



MARTIN ROSS

THAI TALES | Officials take action to close down a site where UFO seekers gather, and the Naga fireballs blaze again



ABOVE: UFO seekers gather at the Buddha statue atop Khao Kala hill, outside the city of Nakhon Sawan. Thai authorities broke up one recent meeting.

BUDDHIST ALIENS

For over 20 years, a hilltop in central Thailand has been attracting UFO seekers who believe that extraterrestrials appear above a huge Buddha statue, where they send telepathic communiqués, walk across nearby sugarcane fields, and use a crocodile-infested lake as a portal to and from their home planets Pluto and Loku. It all began in 1997 in the town of Nakhon Sawan (three hours by road or rail north of Bangkok) where retired Sergeant-Major Cherd Chuensamnaun was deep in Buddhist meditation at his home, when he started receiving mental communications from what he understood to be space aliens.

His family was sceptical. "I asked my father to tell the aliens to show themselves," says Wassana, his daughter. "The next day, the aliens sent energy to spin my brother and brother-in-law." She claims that the two men were lifted up from the living room sofa and simultaneously flung outdoors into the yard. "I felt like my legs and my arms had to spin," adds Wassana's brother-in-law Jaroen Raepeth. "I could not control myself for four or five minutes. I didn't feel afraid. We both spun outside."

Through an upstairs window, Wassana's sister-in-law says she saw a UFO. "It was about 10 or 15

He taught his family how to communicate with the aliens

metres (33-49ft) long, at treetop level," adds Wassana, who left her nursing job to focus on promoting the extraterrestrials and their messages, which, she says, continued to be telepathically transmitted to her father over the years. Prior to his death in 2000, he taught his family how to communicate with the aliens, and today, more than 100 other Thais have acquired this ability, some of whom insist that they too have seen aliens and spaceships in the area.

Khao Kala hill, just outside Nakhon Sawan (which translates as 'City of Heaven') now regularly attracts crowds of UFO enthusiasts who meditate there in the hope of receiving a message from the aliens. Most encounters have been reported either near the Chuensamnaun family home, or at the hill and its surrounding area. The 360-degree view from Khao Kala looks down on the flat sugarcane fields below, where believers claim to have witnessed silvery spacecraft,

festooned with colourful lights and resembling the classic 1950s domed, circular flying saucer. Devotees say they have witnessed aliens disembarking from these craft, walking around the sugarcane fields and then vanishing. The aliens themselves are described as small, slender, silvery humanoids with huge, gloss-black almond-shaped eyes in a pointy face, and bulbous bald heads topped with a single antenna. "There are two types of aliens", Wassana explained. "One group is from the planet Pluto. The others are from a planet named Loku. Pluto aliens are made of energy, can appear in physical form and are able to teach humans. Loku aliens have a physical body and knowledge of high technology. They work together". The planet Loku is apparently "in the Milky Way, but they didn't tell us where."

Khao Kala hill was already a well-established Thai tourist attraction because of its larger-than-life statue of the Buddha protected by a mythical seven-headed Naga snake, and its nearby 'Buddha footprint', both of which are places of public worship. Indeed, some of the UFO devotees claim the extraterrestrials' messages have much in common with traditional Buddhist teachings.

Wassana said she had been told by Pluto's leader that he had been living at the hill for 10,000 years, and that he travels from Pluto to Thailand through different dimensions, using advanced physics. He also told Wassana that the Buddha was "the greatest human mind".

In echoes of George King's Aetherius Society, whose followers also gathered at high places to communicate with advanced interplanetary intelligences (see p77), Pluto's leader gives plenty of advice about "karma", "reincarnation", "greed", "fear", and other Buddhist concerns. But devotees needn't worry about humankind or the Earth itself succumbing to nuclear war, climate change or apocalyptic pandemics. These technologically superior, benevolent aliens have promised



to take care of selected survivors.

Ninety-five per cent of Thailand's population is Buddhist, and whilst Buddhism is open to the possibility of extraterrestrials, ghosts, spirits or other non-human entities, it cautions against illusions. Commenting on the Khao Kala phenomenon, Buddhist scholar Dr Veeranut Rojanaprapa said: "Buddha taught us that maybe the one who says that he thinks he can directly speak with the alien, or he believes he hears them [sic]. But it is not useful. It doesn't matter if he hears the alien or not. It does not help us for [experiencing] nirvana ... most of the situations are only illusion."

Disapproval of anything perceived to be a cult veering too far from traditional religious beliefs has led Thai authorities to take a keen interest in the UFO devotees' gatherings at Khao Kala. Government officials were reportedly alarmed at the potential threat to the area's official "protected forest area" status, and whilst visitors are permitted to climb the hill to view the Buddha statue and to see the nearby "Buddha footprint", the law forbids anyone from living or staying overnight here.

In August, UFO seekers who had pitched tents at the site were dispersed by 40 officials, including members of the Forestry Department, who further petitioned a court to ban mass gatherings there. On 20 September, about 30 police and forestry officials confronted Wassana Chuensamnaun and about 60 other extraterrestrial enthusiasts. The group, wearing white clothing, planned to film a video while meditating on top of the hill after sunset in the hope of contacting the aliens. Reluctant to be arrested, the seekers regrouped at the foot of the hill on private property, where they meditated for a few hours and then left.

"If we find anyone guilty of wrongdoing, we will file a criminal case against them", Police Major General Damrong Petpong told *Khao Sod* newspaper in August. "If a UFO descends and parks here, that's even better. We'll capture them all".



ABOVE: Naga fireballs appear above the Mekong River in northern Thailand.

NAGA FIREBALLS

Roughly 240 miles (386km) northeast of Khao Kala, Thailand's Nong Khai province is also becoming a draw for fortune tourists. Here, the Naga fireball phenomenon (also known as the Mekong lights) has taken place for at least the past 20 years.

The Mekong separates northern Thailand from Laos, and locals believe the Naga, a semi-divine serpent-like being, lives below the waters, protecting both the river and the lives of all who dwell along its shores. At the end of the Buddhist Lent festival in autumn, glowing red fireballs burst from the river. Locals believe these to be the Naga's blessing. In addition, a Buddhist temple in Nong Khai city exhibits certain objects said to be fossilised Naga bones, such as a tooth and an egg.

While their roles vary somewhat among different cultures, Nagas are generally regarded as benevolent servants of the Buddha. On the 15th day of the waxing Moon of the 11th lunar month, a full Moon usually falling in October, the *Phayanak* festival is held (*Phayanak* being the King of the Nagas).

This year, it fell on 13 October 2019, and crowds of tourists eagerly thronged the banks of the Mekong, hoping for a good vantage point. Popular Naga fireball viewing points are in Phon Phisai and Rattanawapee districts, especially in front of the Thai temple in Phon Phisai. Hotel rooms and other accommodation sell out fast. Last year, the climax was on 24 October, when up to 408 of the orbs were counted, 260 in Rattanawapee and 148 in Phon Phisai. Viewer numbers were up 20 per cent on 2017. In Nakhon

Panom, residents and visitors joined in the tradition of *Lai Rua Fai*, setting off boats carrying flames to signify the burning of past grievances and suffering. The phenomenon has become so celebrated that a Naga Fireball Festival, featuring a variety of cultural performances, takes place in Muang Nong Khai district; this year the festival went on for a week.

Various proposals have been made to account for the fireballs; for example, swamp gas, long a sceptics' favourite to explain away alleged UFO sightings. But in laboratory experiments designed to replicate conditions needed for spontaneous ignition, a combination of oxygen, methane, and phosphorus compounds burned bright bluish-green with a sudden pop, producing black smoke. Under no conditions did it burn red, or rise up into the air, as do the Mekong fireballs. Instead, examination of video recordings of the fireballs show red-orange lights ascending very rapidly, consistent with fireworks, small rockets, or even tracer rounds.

However, such sceptical explanations have not dampened the ardour of visitors. In 2001, an estimated 150,000 people attended the festival. Following a TV report, and a movie the same year called *Mekong Full Moon Party*, attendance rose to 400,000 the following year. This brought in 50 to 100 million baht, (around £2.5 million) to the region. Whatever the cause, the Mekong fireballs are a huge boost for the area's otherwise tiny local economy. For more, see: **FT105:22, 166:30-35, 328:10-11.** *skeptoid.com/episodes/4183*, 8 Dec 2009; *[CNN]* 6 Oct; *insider.com*, 8 Oct; *thaivisa.com*, 13 Oct 2019.

SIDELINES...

SCOTTISH PEARLS

A Scottish Natural Heritage graduate has found a rare population of pearl-bearing freshwater mussels on a tributary of the River Spey. *Metro*, 29 Aug 2019.

KORO PIONEER

A 27-year-old Nottingham secretary became the first white woman to develop Koro syndrome – most commonly suffered by West African and Southeast Asian men – where subjects believe their genitals are disappearing. *Sunday Times*, 21 July 2019.

WOOLLY JUMPERS

On 30 June about 180 sheep, walking on an Alpine trail in Bavaria with very dry soil from recent hot weather, lost their footing on a steep slope and fell 100m (325ft) to their deaths. *[AP]* 3 July 2019.

CAIMAN WENT

Swiss authorities called off the hunt for an alligator-like reptile spotted in an inland lake. A fisherman had spotted the 5ft (1.5m) caiman in Lake Hallwil, about 30 miles (50km) west of Zurich, on 14 July when it briefly surfaced and scarfed down a duck. "He'll probably remain a phantom, making it the summer story of the year," said spokesman Bernhard Graser. *[AP]* 31 July 2019.

CAIMAN REVEALED

When a classroom floor at Ysgol Bodringallt, in Pentre, South Wales, was lifted during renovation work on 31 July, workmen discovered a caiman skeleton. Head teacher Dr Neil Pike had heard a story that a "crocodile" had been buried in the school between the world wars, but had dismissed it as "an old myth". *BBC News*, 2 Aug 2019.

WE GOT A WITCH

A 28-year-old self-styled fortune teller from South Florida was jailed for three years and four months for taking £1.3 million from a Texas woman to remove a curse cast by a witch on her family. During the seven-year scam, she claimed she needed large sums of money for crystals and candles to perform meditations that would lift the curse. Her name? Sherry Tina Uwanawich. *[AP]* *BBC News*, 11 Sept; *Metro*, 12 Sept 2019.



STRANGE DAYS

SIDELINES...

AVIAN DEVOTION

Maggie Burns-Cunningham, 71, has been visited by the same seagull twice a day at her cottage in Perth, Scotland, since she first nursed it to health in 2012. "It makes me happy to see him," she said. *Metro*, 22 Aug 2019.

TROUT DELIVERY

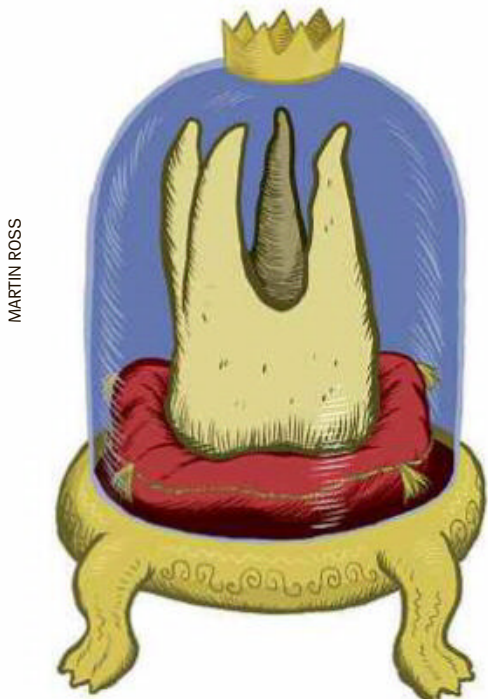
Tony Wright and Paul Friend were on the 14th tee at Rutland Golf Club in Oakham, Leicestershire, when a red kite swooped over their heads and landed in front of them, carrying a trout in its talons. As it struggled to fly off with its meal, it instead left it lying on the freeway. The golfers took the trout home and cooked it for dinner. *D.Telegraph*, 17 Aug 2019.

AUTOMATED ASSAULT

A robot in an Amazon warehouse in Robbinsville, New Jersey, hospitalised 24 of its human colleagues after accidentally puncturing a pressurised can of bear repellent. Thirty others were treated at the scene. The 255g (8oz) can contained concentrated capsicum, an ingredient used in pepper spray. *Irish Independent*, 7 Dec 2018.

ROYAL FANG SHUNNED

One of Edward VIII's wisdom teeth, extracted in 1940 when he was Governor of Bermuda and kept by his dentist, was expected to fetch £10,000 at Omega Auctions, which sold a John Lennon tooth for £19,000 in 2011. The royal lot included an X-ray and dental card, signed "Edward Wallis Windsor" – but it failed to sell. *D.Telegraph*, 21 Sept; *BBC News*, 24 Sept 2019.



MARTIN ROSS

MAD LOVE

Strange men pursue obscure objects of desire, including a BMW, a cleaning cone and a pile of leaves



ABOVE: The Premier Inn in Stockport where diners witnessed Michael Golsorkhi's amorous encounter with a pile of leaves.

DANGEROUS DRIVER

On 16 June 2018, David Jones was driving his BMW on the A55 dual carriageway near Holywell, Flintshire, with his wife Susan as passenger, when they saw another BMW driving close behind. They feared a collision and after a number of minutes felt a bump. Jones turned off along a slip road and pulled in a lay-by. The other BMW approached slowly and began shunting theirs with Mrs Jones still inside, causing £1,689 damage. Mrs Jones got out and her husband's car was pushed 15ft (4.6m). Michael Jameson, who had two previous drink-drive convictions, appeared "vacant" and was sweating profusely. He stopped revving his engine and opened the driver's door, but then climbed through the open window, lay on the ground next to the side of his car, removed his clothing, and simulated sex with his car's wheel arch. He'd also been sprawled face down on his bonnet at one stage. Jameson, 37, who owns a pub in Islington, north London, was driving to catch a ferry from Holyhead to Ireland, but had no recollection of the events leading to his

He appeared to be thrusting with his hips into the cone

arrest. Blood tests came back negative. At a loss to explain his behaviour, he was banned from driving for a year and fined £809. *dailypost.co.uk*, Sun, 5 Feb 2019.

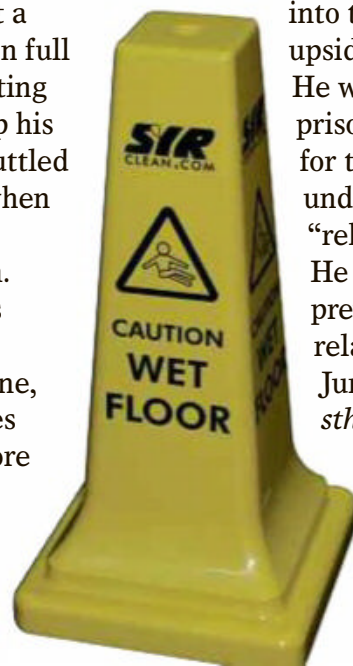
LEAVE HIM BE

Some time in October, Michael Golsorkhi, 26, was spotted in the car park of a Premier Inn in Stockport, Greater Manchester, with his trousers round his ankles, thrusting at a pile of oak leaves, in full view of families eating lunch. He pulled up his underpants and scuttled away into bushes when staff spotted him and shouted at him. Golsorkhi, who was smashed on drink, cannabis and cocaine, stayed in the bushes for 10 minutes before

sheepishly emerging when police arrived. Like Trevor Smith, he had no recollection of his offence. He had to pay £122 in costs and was jailed for eight weeks. *Sun*, 31 Oct; *manchestereveningnews.co.uk*, 2 Nov 2019.

REPEAT OFFENDER

On Sunday, 14 April, Trevor Smith, 48, of St Helens, Merseyside, who had been on a drink and drugs bender, was observed attempting to copulate with a cleaning cone in a lift at Wigan North Western railway station. Two Virgin Trains employees witnessed Smith sitting on the floor with his trousers and underpants pulled down. He appeared to be thrusting with his hips into the cone, which was upside down on his lap. He was given a 26-week prison sentence suspended for two years and told to undertake up to 30 days of "rehabilitation activity". He had two similar previous convictions, relating to incidents in June 2012 and June 2016. *sthelensstar.co.uk*, 24 Oct; *Sun*, 25 Oct 2019.





POISON DWARF? | Or a staggeringly bizarre case of child neglect involving an adopted orphan?



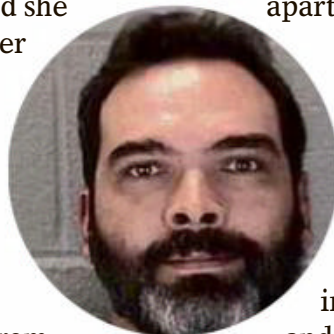
ABOVE LEFT: A photo of Natalia in 2012, when according to her original birth certificate, she would have been nine years old. ABOVE RIGHT: Natalia tells her story on the *Dr Phil* chat show. BELOW: Kristine and Michael Barnett – victims or abusers?

Kristine and Michael Barnett, an American couple who adopted a daughter in 2010, were charged earlier in 2019 with child neglect. Their adoptee was a Ukrainian orphan, Natalia, said at the time to be six years old, and who suffers from a form of dwarfism, spondyloepiphyseal. Natalia, who had previously lived with several other foster families, is 3ft (1m) tall and has difficulty walking.

The Barnetts claim they gradually became aware Natalia was several years older than she claimed, and further, that she was trying to murder them. They have described her as a “sociopath” and a “con artist”. They say their suspicions were initially aroused upon observing how Natalia behaved, more like a teenager than a young girl, not wanting to play with toys, and preferring to spend time with older girls. Kristine Barnett described her shock while bathing Natalia and seeing full pubic hair, and claims Natalia had periods and adult teeth. The Barnetts further allege that Natalia was unable

to converse with a Ukrainian friend, casting doubt on her backstory, and that a bone density test suggested she was several years older than she claimed. In 2012 they filed a motion with Marion County Superior Court to have the date on Natalia’s birth certificate changed from 2003 to 1989.

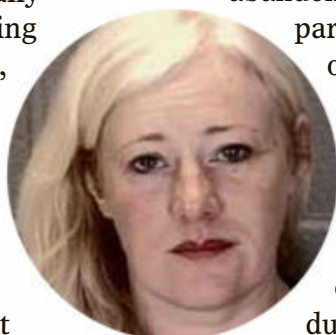
The child neglect charge dates back to 2014, when Natalia, who had been living alone for one year in an Indiana apartment paid for by the Barnetts (who had by then moved to Canada), complained to police that she had been abandoned by her foster-parents. Natalia insists on the veracity of her stated age, and says the murder threats were a misunderstanding, that she had lived on canned food during her year alone in the apartment when just nine years old, and that the Barnetts had enrolled her in an adult school during this time, telling her to state her age as 22. Michael Barnett is said to



have confessed to police that he knew Natalia to be a child at the time he left her in the apartment.

The Barnetts argue that they had been forced to place Natalia there after she had tried to poison Kristine’s coffee and push her into an electric fence, and had threatened to stab the entire family in their sleep (they have three biological sons). They also say that Natalia had previously been a resident in a long-stay psychiatric ward, during which time she admitted to lying about her age. A trial date of 28 January 2020 has been set, and the Barnetts issued with a gagging order after speaking to several news outlets, including US chat shows *Dr Phil* and *Dr Oz*.

One intriguing aspect of the case is its close similarity to the 2009 horror film *The Orphan*, in which a couple adopt a child who turns out to be a Russian woman with stunted physical growth. In the film, the woman murders several people, including her adopted father. *D.Telegraph*, 24+25 Sept, 9 Nov; *Sun*, 25 Sept; *BBC News*, 8 Nov 2019.



SIDELINES...

TOOTH WILL OUT

In 1994, Jeff Weakley was attacked by a shark while swimming near his home in Florida. Some 25 years later, a painful blister developed on his foot, and an unsuspected shark’s tooth fragment was excavated from his flesh. *D.Mirror*, 4 July 2019.

HACKING RISK

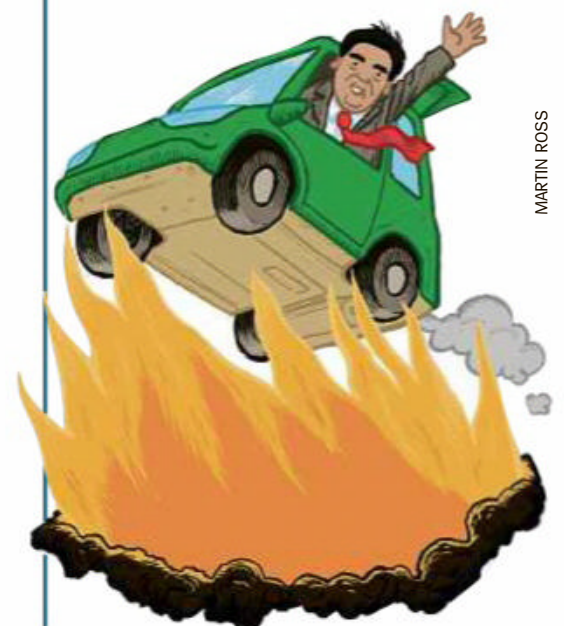
The Royal Society has warned that brain-reading implants could allow companies, politicians or marketers to access people’s thoughts, and called in the Government to launch an urgent inquiry. Several companies are developing neural interface software, including Elon Musk, who is planning trials on people with locked-in syndrome. *D.Telegraph*, 10 Sept 2019.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

When a 55-year-old woman filled up her car’s tank with the wrong fuel in Eschborn, Germany, she tried to suck it out with a vacuum cleaner. She joined a hose to the vac, which burst into flames as it filled with petrol, causing £27,800 of damage at the gas station. That same month, a Massachusetts man, who tried to use a Roman candle firework to destroy a nest of hornets, set his roof on fire. *Metro*, 13 Aug; *D.Mirror*, 24 Aug 2019.

GATES OF HELL STUNT

To scotch rumours of his death, Turkmenistan’s eccentric president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, was shown on state TV on 4 August driving in circles in a rally car round “The Gates of Hell”, a 220ft (67m)-wide collapsed natural gas field that has been burning continuously since 1971. *Irish Independent*, 6 Aug 2019.





STRANGE DAYS

SIDELINES...

PULL THE OTHER ONE

A 51-year-old Thai woman from Bangkok was sent to hospital complaining of vaginal pain because she had a cucumber stuck inside her. She told hospital staff that she fell down in her house, a cucumber happened to be there, and it “simply slipped inside her”. She insisted it was “just an accident.” *thethaiger.com*, 15 Aug 2019.

GRANNY'S MEMENTO

Ivan Gallienne, 70, from Guernsey, bought three magazines from hundreds at a collectors' fair. Inside one he found the wartime ID card of his grandmother Hélène Gallienne, from the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands. With it was a 1940s RAF leaflet and a press clipping about a relative killed by a mine. *D.Mirror*, 22 Dec 2018.

NOT VERY WOKE

Georges Boeckstaens, 76, a former corporal in the Belgian army, faces jail time after festooning his home in the Flemish village of Keerbergen with Nazi insignia and his garden with Hitler scarecrows giving the Third Reich salute. *D.Telegraph*, 15 Nov 2019.

CLEVER CANINE

A border collie from Spartanburg, South Carolina, that learnt to recognise more than 1,000 words, died last July aged 15. Chaser became known as the world's cleverest dog under the tutelage of John Pilley, an animal psychologist who devoted his retirement to her instruction. She arrived in 2004 and Dr Pilley worked with her for five hours a day. *Times*, 30 July 2019.

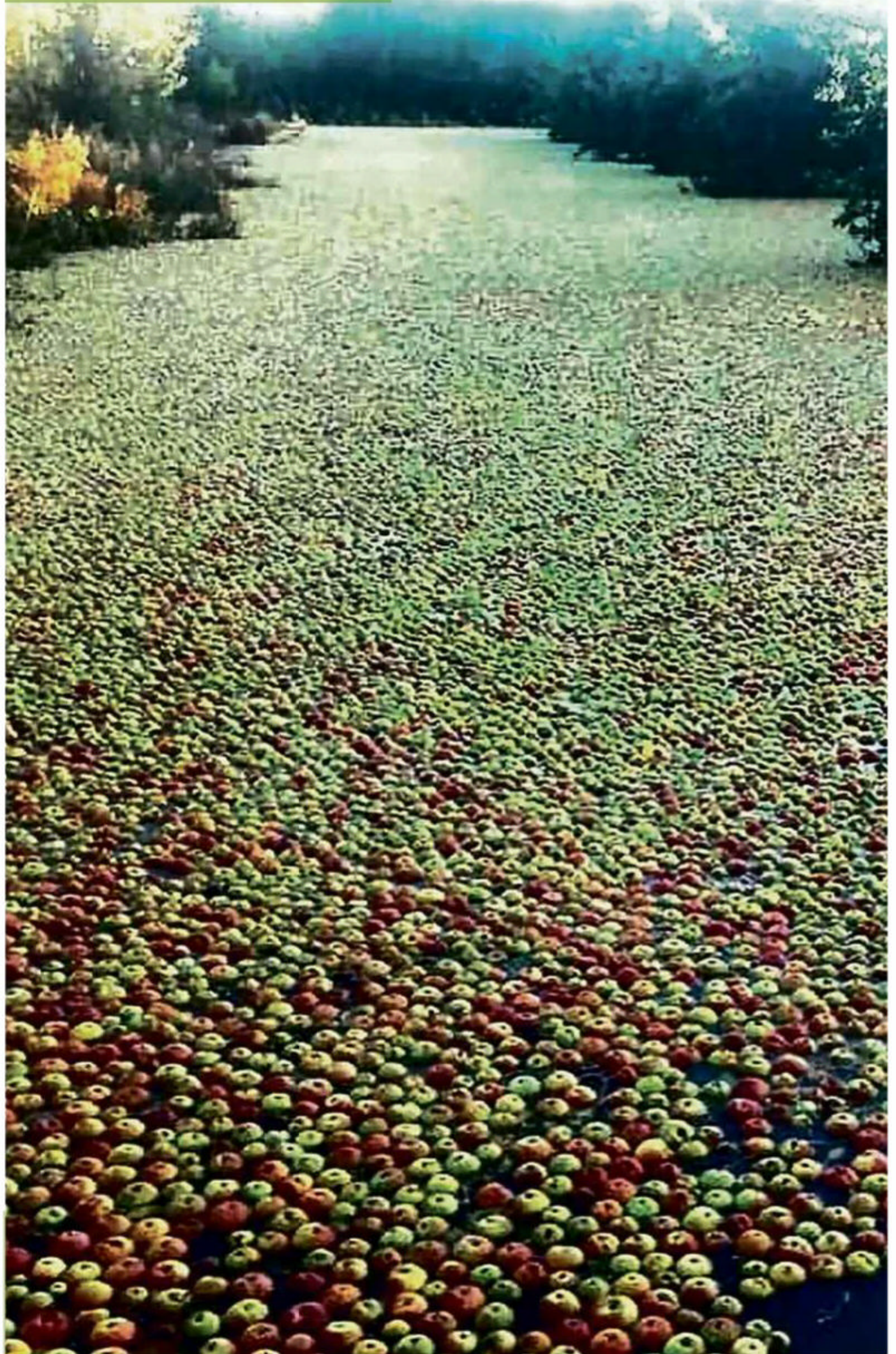
SCALEY STOWAWAY

A live gecko found in a punnet of raspberries at a Sainsbury's store in Basildon, Essex, on 27 May was collected by the RSPCA. Where it had come from or how it got into the punnet were unknown. *Sun*, 5 June; *D.Mail*, 6 June 2019.

WILD WEST

Following a spate of far-right demonstrations in Portland, Oregon, the city attempted to rally community groups behind a message of zero tolerance for violence. Speakers at an event to promote this message included Danielle Outlaw, the Portland police chief. *Guardian*, 17 Aug 2019.

APPLE BOBBING



After Storm Callum brought unusually heavy rains, flooding large areas of Staunton-on-Wye, Herefordshire, last October, local orchards were inundated, causing tens of

thousands of apples to be washed into the river Wye, where they were seen bobbing down the river at speed for the next three hours. *D.Express*, *Times*, 31 Oct 2019.

SNWS

NO NEED TO SEARCH THE SKIES

THE PERFECT
ForteanTimes
GIFT IS CLOSER
TO HOME



T-SHIRT



MUG



TEA TOWEL

DISCOVER FT'S NEW RANGE OF GIFTS AT
SEARCH MORETVICAR.COM FOR 'FORTEAN TIMES'

PAUL SIEVEKING uncovers extensive Bronze Age trade routes, long-lived unicorns and ancient sex

BRONZE AGE TRADE

At the opening of the Nordic Bronze Age (2000-1700 BC), the availability of tin and copper in Scandinavia increased dramatically. Analysis of 210 Bronze Age artefact samples from Denmark, representing almost half of all known existing Danish metal objects from this period, reveals imports of both raw metals and crafted objects from the British Isles and across the Baltic Sea from the east. Isotopic signatures and high tin contents with relatively pure copper in many of the British-style axes contrasts with an unexpected predominance of Slovakian copper. Metal recycling was common: Nordic smiths repeatedly hacked up imported and local metal objects to recast them for new local products. Metal mixing in this early period is distinct from the alloying of copper with tin to create high-quality bronze, though there is evidence of rather pure copper from the eastern Alps beginning to be used this early. *EurekaAlert! 24 July, via Archaeo News, 27 Aug 2019.*

Stunning glass beads found in Danish Bronze Age burials dating to 3,400 years ago turn out to have come from Egypt and the Middle East, indicating that there were established trade routes between Nordic Europe and the Levant at that early date. Twenty-three of the glass beads were cobalt blue, a rare colour in ancient times. “Lapis lazuli was the most precious gemstone in the Nordic Late Bronze Age,” said Danish archaeologist Jeanette Varberg. “Blue glass was the next best thing.” One of the blue beads was found with a Bronze Age woman buried in Olby, Denmark, in a hollowed oak coffin wearing a sun disc, a smart string skirt decorated with small bronze tubes, and an arm bracelet made of amber (fossilized tree resin) beads. Another blue bead was found in a necklace together with four pieces of amber, in the burial of another woman.

Glass and amber shared symbolic or magical values that made it beneficial to carry them together. According to Greek mythology, amber was the tears of the daughters of the Sun god Helios – or, according to Apollonius of Rhodes, the tears shed by the Sun god Apollo when he was visiting the land of the Hyperboreans (ancient Scandinavians) and heard about the death of his son. Generally, blue was associated with the heavens and with sea, lakes and rivers. In Ancient Egypt, blue was more specifically associated with life and rebirth, and represented (the fertility of) the Nile, the heavens, and also the primæval waters from which the Sun, Ra, was



NATIONALMUSEET, DENMARK



ABOVE: Bronze Age blue glass beads from Denmark. LEFT: Plasma-spectrometry revealed that the blue glass in Tutankhamun's death mask originated in the same Egyptian workshop.

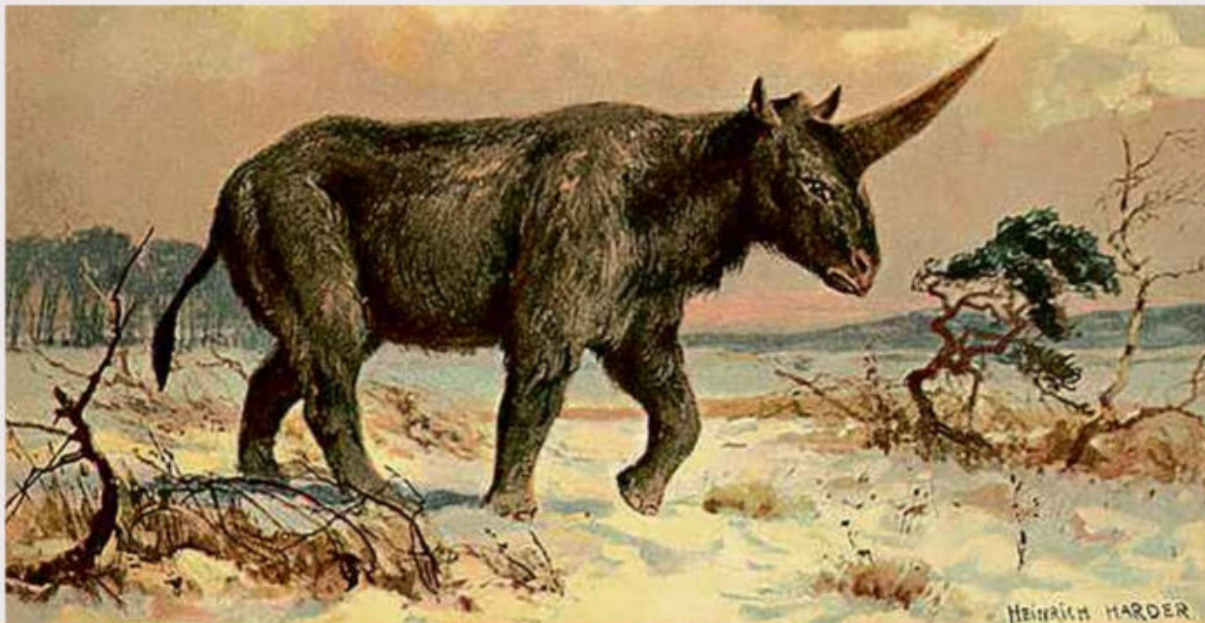
created. Thus, in Egypt blue was related to creation myths and the re-birth of the Sun every morning.

The blue beads found in Denmark were analysed using plasma-spectrometry, which enables comparison of trace elements. This showed that they originated from the same glass workshop in Amarna in Egypt that adorned King Tutankhamun at his funeral in 1323 BC. The pharaoh's golden death mask contains stripes of blue glass in the headdress, as well as in the inlay of his false beard. It seems that Egypt and Denmark traded the luxury glass beads for amber, which was associated with the Sun God, both in ancient Egypt and the Nordic areas. Altogether 271 glass beads have been found at 51 burials sites in Denmark, the majority of which originated from Nippur, Mesopotamia, about 30 miles (50km) southeast of Baghdad.

Nordic amber has been found as far south as Mycenæ in Greece and at Qatna, near Homs in Syria. Together with other

finds such as Cypriot copper found in Sweden, the picture of an elaborate trade system emerges. Nordic amber beads as well as beads made of Egyptian glass and copper ingots formed part of the cargo of the Bronze Age ship wrecked at Uluburun, found in 1982 about six miles (9.7km) miles southeast of Kaş, in south-western Turkey. However, the glass exchange almost stops around 1177 BC – probably due to attacks by the Sea Peoples. After that date, fewer glass beads seem to have reached the north. However, new workshops arose in Italy's Po Valley, where they turned glass into glass beads and processed Nordic amber from natural lumps into finished gems. *haaretz.com, 9 Mar 2019.*

Twenty-three tin ingots from shipwrecks off the coast of Israel date from about the 13th century BC. Tin was a prerequisite for making bronze swords and armour. Analysis of the 10-15kg (22-33lb) ingots by researchers in Mannheim, Germany, indicates that they weren't from central Asia as assumed, but from Cornwall and Devon – possibly the Carnmenellis area of west Cornwall. The researchers speculate that this trade was initiated before the Phœnicians by the Mycenæan Greeks, who rose to prominence around 1430 BC. “Unlike the Minoans,” they write in the journal *Plos One*, “the Mycenæans sailed west and established trading ports... which served as gateways to new trading routes to Britain and the European interior.” The researchers also examined a tin ingot of the period from Crete and others from a shipwreck off Turkey. The metal in these appeared to derive from Afghanistan and Sardinia, respectively, indicating that there were a number of different tin routes. *Times, 19 Sept 2019.*



'UNICORN' LIVED WITH HUMANS

The 'Siberian unicorn', a species of single-horned rhino once thought to have gone extinct 100,000 years ago, actually survived for another 65,000 years. The 3.5-ton *Elasmotherium sibiricum* eventually disappeared during the megafaunal extinction, when the woolly mammoth and sabre-toothed cat also died out. Carbon-dating of 23 skulls in European collections showed that some were as recent as 35,000 BP. There is no evidence that humans hunted these beasts; their extinction is attributed to changes in climate and the rhinos' solitary grazing habits. *D.Mail*, 27 Nov 2018.

STONE'S THROES OF PASSION

The world's earliest known depiction of a couple getting their rocks off toured the country this summer as part of an exhibition exploring LGBTQ history. The 4in (10cm) calcite cobble sculpture known as the Ain Sakhri Lovers, showing two figures having face-to-face sex in a sitting position, dates to about 9000 BC. The carved pebble was discovered in a cave near Bethlehem in 1933, and was made by the Natufians, among the first people to domesticate sheep and goats. It has been ingeniously carved so that, whichever way you look at it, the shape of the figurine is phallic but the genders of the couple are not revealed. The British Museum purchased it in 1958, and it features in Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010, pp.37-42). *Sun*, 26 June; *Metro*, 27 June 2019.

TAX EVASION IN THE 11TH CENTURY

Last January, metal detectorists Adam Staples and Lisa Grace unearthed a hoard of 2,528 silver pennies from the time of the Norman Conquest, retrieved from a field in Chew Valley, Somerset, over four hours during a thunderstorm. Pennies were the only denomination minted at the time. First reports (*D.Mail* & *D.Mirror*) said there were 2,571 coins; the BBC states the hoard includes 1,236 Harold II pennies and 1,310 William I pennies and some fragments. The hoard would have been enough to buy 500 sheep in 1067-68. Three of the coins are "mules", a combination of two types of coin, essentially an early form of tax evasion by moneyers (dodging the fees for new dies). If caught, the miscreants risked

losing a hand. These mules have designs and legends (inscriptions) that relate to both monarchs. There are also previously unrecorded mints for both kings' coins (like Bath for Harold).

The hoard (of 2,528 or 2,546 or 2,571 coins) is likely to have been buried by a wealthy landowner not long after the Battle of Hastings. It is the largest Norman treasure hoard found since a lead chest containing 8,000-9,000 silver pennies of William I and William II was unearthed in Beaworth, Hampshire, in 1833. The Somerset hoard contains double the number of Harold's coins than all previous finds combined. These were never numerous as Harold reigned for only nine months. *D.Mail*, *D.Mirror*, 26 Aug; *D.Telegraph*, 29 Aug 2019.



TOP: An artist's impression of the 'Siberian unicorn'. **ABOVE:** The Ain Sakhri Lovers, hard at it. **LEFT:** Some of the hoard of over 2,500 coins unearthed by metal detectorists in Somerset, consisting of pennies of Harold II and William I.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

244: BY GEORGE!

Might seem a drastic flit from my customary ancient affairs.

Hang on, though. Lots of people around to whom the 1930s are ancient history.

And, Orwell was steeped in Greek and Latin. For the full story, see Paul Burton's exhaustive 'George Orwell and the Classics,' *Classical and Modern Literature* 25/1 (2005), pp53-75, with lavish quotations and meticulous tracing of Orwell's ever-shifting attitudes – available online.

At his (much-maligned, by himself) prep school, George came top of the class in Greek and Latin. When translated to Eton, though, he plummeted to the bottom. The College Archive 'Orwell at Eton' shows a facsimile of his dismal report, part of a display to mark the 101st anniversary of Orwell (then, of course, Eric Blair) entering the school. 101 may seem an odd anniversary – until you think of Room 101...

Blair/Orwell's Classics beak was the distinguished editor of Hellenistic Poetry, ASF Gow, who (rightly, his errant pupil confessed) blamed this precipitous decline on sheer idleness. Later, they occasionally corresponded and met. Anthony Blunt thought highly of Gow's knowledge of art history, which perhaps inspired the half-baked notion (see, e.g., *Daily Mail*, 20 Oct 2012, online) that he was the 'Fifth Man' in the Cambridge Spy Ring.

In spite of his Etonian classical delinquency, Orwell chose Greek and Latin as his options for the 1922 India Office exams. Thanks to his high marks in these, he scraped through and was off to his not-so-happy Burmese Days.

Philip Bounds in his *Orwell and the Paranormal* (published online by the Orwell Society) details his lifelong preoccupation with the occult, claiming its affinity with the 'far right' in his dissection of WB Yeats (*Horizon*, Jan 1943, published by his former Eton classmate Cyril Connolly), and seeing it manifest in some of the Winston Smith imagery in 1984.

In his biography of Orwell (2003), Gordon Bowker interviewed the late, great Byzantinist Sir Steven Runciman (see forthcoming FT column on this classical curiosity), a fellow-Etonian. Runciman revealed that he and Blair had practised voodoo on Philip Yorke, an older boy and Flashman-style bully. Blair, inspired by RH Barham's ghost story 'The Leech of Folkestone', moulded a melted candle into a crude effigy of Yorke. Ranchman blenched at the idea of sticking a pin into



its heart, so they compromised by breaking off its right leg. A few days later, Yorke broke his leg playing football – and died young of acute lymphatic leukæmia in July 1917, three months after Orwell entered Eton. Before Runciman's disclosure, both men had hugged this guilty secret to themselves. Catherine Milner, reviewing Bowker (*D.Telegraph*, 18 May 2003), mentions sources that say Blair changed his name out of fear his enemies would use black magic against his real one.

Two other macabre episodes described by Orwell are detailed by Ronald Binns in his superlative *Orwell in Southwold* (2018, pp45-6, 60-1), the first one also by Bounds. Binns also caters to FT readers with his *The Loch Ness Mystery Reloaded* (2017), published on the 50th anniversary of the local newspaper's report of Nessie's epiphany – Binns was a member of the Loch Ness Phenomena Investigation Bureau.

In a letter (16 Aug 1931) to his friend Dennis Collings, Orwell describes what happened to him at 5.20pm, Monday, 27 July, at Walberswick Cemetery in the grounds of the Church of St Andrew. This exact chronological pinpointing enhances the impression this experience made on him.

I'll let Orwell tell this story of his ghostly encounter: "I wasn't looking directly at it & so couldn't make out more than it was a man's figure, small & stooping & dressed in lightish brown; I should have said a workman. I had the impression that it glanced towards me in passing, but I made out nothing of the features. At the moment

of its passing I thought nothing, but a few seconds later it struck me that the figure had made no noise, & I followed it out into the churchyard. There was no one in the churchyard, & no one within possible distance along the road – this was about 20 seconds after I had seen it." Orwell included a sketch of the church, marking the ghost's route. He then dismissed – trying to laugh it off? – the vision as "presumably an hallucination".

Mysterious boxes are not uncommon. Dictys's *Diary of the Trojan War* was supposedly found in an excavated one inscribed with Phœnician characters and taken to emperor Nero. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries there was Joanna Southcott's Box of Sealed Writings, claimed by adherents to contain all-embracing Prophecies of the Future [see FT151:21, 152:48-49, 296:15] – I recall many newspaper advertisements of this, with fevered demands that it be opened in the presence of the 24 bishops of England. But none comes stranger than the one found by Orwell in 1930 and described by him in a letter (6 July 1940) to Sacheverell Sitwell, whose book *Poltergeists* Orwell reviewed in *Horizon* (Sept 1940).

What follows owes much to Binns's account – I cannot recommend his book too highly. One afternoon, Orwell was taking a disabled lad, Bryan Morgan, on a walk across Walberswick Common, a characteristic act of kindness. Bryan spotted a parcel under a gorse bush. It contained a cardboard shoebox, set up like a doll's house with miniature furniture and tiny women's clothes. There was also a note reading THIS IS NOT BAD IS IT? Orwell calculated that the polio-wracked Bryan could not have wrought such delicate work. He jumped to the conclusion that it was intended to be found and, more dramatically, that it was the creation of a local woman "suffering from some kind of sexual aberration." All a bit Midsomer Murderish. Orwell felt this 'deviant' could easily be flushed out from so small a village, but (oddly or not) made no effort to do so. They returned the box to its place. Some days later, it was gone.

End of story. Orwell long pondered the mystery, judging it "vaguely unwholesome". Binns makes the interesting suggestion that his account resembled the kind of police report he was used to making in Burma.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

NO SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

CAROLYN WAUDBY immerses herself in the conference of the 2019 International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, held in Memphis last June, where the supernatural origins of Delta blues were laid bare.

Memphis, Tennessee. Reputedly mentioned in more songs than any other city, birthplace of rock 'n' roll, home of the blues, and the final destination of Dr Martin Luther King.

It's a fitting location for the 37th conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research – a gathering of academics, storytellers, journalists and fans of the strange. Up the road, at Clarksdale, Robert Johnson was said to have made a pact with the Devil in return for outstanding guitar skills. The Mississippi Delta is awash with folklore.

Or rather, it's not a delta – more an alluvial flood plain. The name itself is the subject of legend, points out conference co-organiser, Gregory Hansen of Arkansas State University. "It's a mystery why it's called a delta."

A stone's throw from Beale Street ¹ in the Centre for Southern Folklore, Hansen addresses the "scholarly trope of blues from the Delta", unpicking the myths that surround the region's musical heritage against a backdrop of American quilts.

Hansen begins with arguably the biggest legend of all, that of Mississippi blues guitarist Robert Johnson. Stories about Johnson circulated in the region's juke joints and it was in a juke joint where the charismatic musician's legend began. "He turns up and asks to play his guitar – and when he does, he isn't very good," recounts Hansen. The guitarist continues to pester people and they tell him not to come back. He disappears for a year or so and returns. When he does, Son House is there and Johnson

wants to play. House agrees – but when Johnson's fingers touch the guitar strings, heads turn. He has become a great player, and he's performing original tunes audiences haven't heard before. People ask, what's happened?

The story passed around is that Johnson went to the crossroads of the old Highways 61 and 49, near Clarksdale ² and sold his soul to the Devil. But, as a result of dealing with 'he who cannot be named', Johnson was told he would die an agonising death at the age of 27.

Legends of men trading with the Devil in exchange for their souls stretch far back in time – such as the story of Faust. And they crop up frequently in music. For example, in 1979 The Charlie Daniels Band released a track entitled "The Devil Went Down To Georgia" in which a youth named Johnny engages in a fiddle-playing contest with Satan.

Canadian storyteller, musician and conference attendee Gail de Vos delves deeply into the multi-layered Robert Johnson narrative in her book *What Happens Next? Contemporary Urban Legends and Popular Culture*. She presented a paper on the story at a previous ISCLR conference. ³

Hansen related how his own interest in blues narratives was sparked when he witnessed how teachers were using this and other legends in the classroom in Pennsylvania. "Teachers are engaging in the folklore process," he told the conference. But this led to him thinking about the whole trope of the 'Delta blues' and "some of the problems of thinking uncritically".

Hansen argued that Johnson's famous blues song "Cross Roads" is, in fact, not about a deal with the Devil but about "spiritual faith" in which

the guitarist falls to his knees to pray. The Devil legend is probably connected to an earlier Johnson, he continued – Tommy Johnson, a Delta blues musician born in 1896. "Robert Johnson is really a regular guy. This is about white jazz and blues writers looking for exoticism."

Hansen admitted that blues scholarship has changed even his own assumptions about blues in the Delta. Dispelling the idea that the blues found their origins exclusively among African American musicians in the Delta, Hansen listed other influences and sources, such as an account of a black musician in 1903 pressing a knife on the guitar in "Hawaiian style", producing the weirdest music ever heard. "This was probably more music hall."

Square dancing and reels (or "reals") with string instruments such as mandolins and guitars were other possible sources – music about "real life rather than spiritual life". Indian-style music played in Florida, ⁴ plus the music of black banjo and fiddle players also contributed.

Musician and music publisher WC Handy, honoured with a statue in the centre of Memphis, is reputed to have written the first blues song on Beale Street in 1909 and has been dubbed the 'Father of the Blues'. Here



ABOVE: Beale Street in Downtown Memphis, 'Home of the Blues' and confluence of various streams of musical folklore.

CAROLYN WAUDBY



ABOVE LEFT: WC Handy looks out over Beale Street from his spot in Handy Park. ABOVE RIGHT: Sign for Memphis 'Blues Trail'.

Hansen took his academic argument deeper, pointing out that some of the lyrics of the so-called blues don't follow the usual composition pattern. River music, Vaudeville, minstrel shows and high-end shows more connected to the jazz scene also became linked to Memphis and the Mississippi.

Hansen claimed that the blues as a distinct genre doesn't show up until 1911 or so. The Delta then started to come in to the picture. Blues became a popular and accepted definition, characterised by 12 bars, call and response, a diatonic scale and flattened notes. But he warned scholars should be looking at a whole network of origins rather than merely Delta sources. "We're positing something with no documentation. We've over-generalised musical history."

"We've fallen into the trope of trying to find the home of the blues. Like the birthplace of Homer, we've got all these homes for the blues in Memphis and Arkansas. Whole traditions have been neglected, such as the piano."

Memphis trades heavily on its musical heritage. Tourists can visit the Sun Studio, where Elvis cut his first recordings, the Stax museum of American Soul Music and The Rock 'n' Soul Museum, to name just a few attractions. But even the blues

trails were "calling the history into question."

Hansen invited the conference to examine how mass media excludes some of the musical traditions of the blues. "There is observational bias. Folklorists have been complicit in this ... Pre-conceived notions and definitions are linked to the process of legend-making."

Among the blues legends, monsters of all shapes and characteristics made a prominent appearance, though none from the Delta. Gail de Vos illustrated how the Wendigo – an often 'misrepresented' and 'fearsome' Indigenous figure – had been culturally appropriated without regard to its roots or contextual background. The entertainment industry had latched onto the Wendigo, carelessly depicting it in comic books, cartoons, films, novels and television as a "stock villain" in the manner of vampires and werewolves, she argued.

Eleanor Hasken, of Indiana University, related how The Mothman of Point Pleasant, Virginia, had become sexualised and romanticised, including recently among the LGBTQ+ community. She reported that visitors run their credit cards down the crack between the buttocks of a statue outside the town's

museum.⁵ Meanwhile, David Puglia, editor of a new casebook of North American monster legends due out soon from Utah University Press, discussed monster stories in relation to the landscape and environment of the New World.

Supernatural art was an emerging theme with indie horror film *The Velvet Buzzsaw*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Rene Russo, the subject of a paper from Michelle Jones and Margot Crabtree of Utah State University. FT's Dr David Clarke demonstrated how UFO symbols have sparked visual rumour and legend, and Alan Brown from the University of West Alabama expounded on the legends behind indelible images in stone and glass.

Unusually, among the witches, fairies and hellhounds, there were stories from combat zones. Folklorist Richard Burns showed how Vietnam marine combat sniper Carlos Hathcock had been turned into a folk hero among fellow soldiers, while Jesse Fivecoate from Indiana justifiably won the student prize for sensitive research uncovering ghost narratives that emerged from the horrors of the Northern Ireland Troubles.

Some might think legends are just stories. But in times of war they can be used by decision makers and agencies

to manipulate the masses, sometimes with serious consequences – the focus of a paper by Henrik Olinder of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

Next year's conference will take place in the ancient Catalan port of Tarragona, Spain. Sign up now at: <http://www.contemporarylegend.org/>

NOTES

1 Beale Street was developed in 1899 by Robert R Church Senior, Memphis's first African-American millionaire, as a centre for black culture. In 1903, a trumpet player from Clarksdale, Mississippi, named WC Handy, was invited to teach music and Memphis became the home of the musician who created the "Blues on Beale Street". The street became a celebrated home of the blues. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Louis Armstrong, Muddy Waters and Albert King were among blues and jazz legends who played there. As a young man, BB King was billed as "the Beale Street Blues Boy" and a club he owned on the street still hosts live blues music today.

2 The location of the crossroads is disputed and, in fact, is believed to be Rosedale, Mississippi. However, a sign comprising a sculpture of three electric guitars stands at Clarksdale. <https://rolfpotts.com/robert-johnson-sold-his-soul-to-the-devil-in-roosedale-mississippi/>

3 Gail De Vos, *A Meeting with the Devil at the Crossroads: A Contemporary Legend?*, Third Series 1, 2011, p. 119-159.

4 According to Hansen, the context for Indian style refers to the phrase 'The Blues in Indian Style'. This was a song performed by Estelle Harris by 1911. It's one of the first documented examples of the term 'blues' being used to identify a musical genre. There are credits of her performing the song in Memphis at The Savoy. But researchers have found advertising and promotional items that could go back earlier, including shows in Florida. The 'Indian style' would refer to Native Americans in the USA and is thought to refer to a way of performing the music.

5 The Mothman statue is modelled on an illustration by artist Frank Franzetta on the dust jacket of the second edition of John Keel's book *The Mothman Prophecies*, originally published in 1975.



The ghosts of the Cecil Hotel

ALAN MURDIE investigates a haunted hotel on the mean streets of downtown Los Angeles

Hotels and inns worldwide reflect a microcosm of humanity. They may be renowned as places of relaxation, celebration, fellowship and romance. Or they can be known for the darker aspects of human life. Crimes and conspiracies may be hatched or executed beneath their roofs, blood from fights and killings may stain their walls and floors, and some are tragically selected as venues by lonely suicides choosing to end their lives inside them.

In its 95-year history, the former Cecil Hotel, situated at 640 South Main Street, Los Angeles, has been the scene of a far larger share of tragic and traumatic deaths than most hotels ever suffer. Though only involving a fraction of the guests to have ever set foot in this veritable warren of 700 budget rooms over the years, they have remained infamous in collective memory. A belated and partial re-branding of the hotel as 'Stay on Main' in 2015 and a conversion of portions into private residences have come too late to dispel its embedded reputation as the most haunted place in the city. Finding myself in Los Angeles at the beginning of October, I decided to investigate.

I had been tipped off about the Cecil by a Guatemalan lady who told me, "I never dared even walking past the door," confessing her discouragement stemmed from an incident related to her by a friend who witnessed the stabbing of a paramedic called to attend a guest.

Though travelling to the Cecil in relentless Californian sunshine, I soon realised, before reaching it, that sections of the locality in which it is situated exude a profound sense of threat and unease. Were one in the company of Byron, Shelley or Dickens, perhaps adorned in the clothing of an earlier era or visiting some pirate's 17th century cove, an air of historical romance might surround such a venture. But there were no travellers or retainers resplendent in period costumes to divert attention from the symptoms of inner-city deprivation visible in the 21st century in the district – notorious for decades as one of the 'skid rows' of Los Angeles, with plenty having skidded off it – reflecting the failures of a wealthy society to care for vulnerable human beings.

The block that forms the Cecil is gaunt and imposing, rising up like a primitive monument, amid the detritus of surrounding streets, an impression relieved only by the presence of a few strategically planted saplings.



ABOVE: The exterior of the Cecil Hotel, Los Angeles, California. BELOW: The Cecil pictured in its heyday.

The block that forms the Cecil is gaunt and imposing, rising up like a primitive monument



Re-named as 'Stay on Main', the building retains some large original signage announcing it still as 'the Cecil'. From appearances, a much-vaunted renovation announced in 2017 has a long way to go. Ravaged victims of crack cocaine and crystal-meth have replaced the drunkards and hobos of yesteryear. Close by, on its perimeter, an unconscious homeless man lay sprawled like a starfish, partially covered by a synthetic blanket.

No attempt has been made to remove graffiti and cartoons of satanic faces scrawled by a crude hand on external pillars facing the street. As I regarded its frontage, on cue, a dishevelled man, who appeared to have just left his bed, loped past me and declared; "This is the Cecil – the most haunted place in LA – it's... crazy!"

"Haunted by what exactly?" I asked but he did not tarry and disdained to supply any answer.

On the afternoon I called, it transpired the Cecil had even surrendered its budget hotel status. The outer doors were solidly locked, displaying a notice that it was currently closed, having been taken over by filmmakers attracted by the once-glorious art-deco lobby. The director and producer wanted no talk of ghosts at this moment, concentrating on exploiting the still impressive, if faded, interior as an authentic set for their work. I could only hope they would treat the place more favourably than



window. She was found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity (curiously, stories of a similar incident were circulating in London the same month, concerning what became known as the ‘House of Suicides’ in Montpelier Road, Ealing [FT342:30-35]. Other people known to be staying at the premises have vanished; disturbingly an ‘Adamelis Ortiz’ posted a claim online in summer 2019, that her cousin Mary, aged 17, had disappeared whilst staying in the hotel, describing it as a ‘hotel of horror’.

One fatality of recent years continues to resonate beyond all others, proving impossible to shake off. This was the mysterious death in 2013 of Elisa Lam, a 21-year-old Canadian student, reported missing after checking in on 31 January. Two weeks after her disappearance, police released disturbing footage from a lift camera showing her behaving erratically, randomly pressing bells and talking with someone unseen. Meanwhile guests at the Cecil were complaining of discoloured water flowing from taps, and of the water having a peculiar taste. On 19 February 2013, the cause was revealed. An employee dispatched to investigate the plumbing problems discovered a naked and decomposing female corpse in the main water tank. It was the body of the missing Elisa Lam. Investigating officials ultimately recorded the verdict “accidental death due to drowning”. Complaints about water quality have persisted ever since, mixed in with widely separated claims of ghostly manifestations. The grim facts of the Elisa Lam case and other tragedies continue to generate sensational coverage, the stuff from which morbid urban legends are born. (Sources: *Guardian*, 21 Feb 2013; *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Mar 2014; *D.Telegraph*, 3 Mar 2017, *Sun*, 9 Sep 2019).

did the fifth season of *American Horror Story*, which exploited the dark legacy of the Cecil as a ‘true-life’ inspiration for its fictional ‘Hotel Cortez’, supposedly notorious for hauntings and murders (featuring Lady Gaga as a 111-year-old vampire countess).

So, my many questions were destined not to be answered, but with a list of violent deaths stretching back to the Great Depression of the 1930s there is no shortage of potential candidates who may be haunting the premises.

Suicides have recurred periodically since a guest named Norton killed himself in 1931, mostly by persons leaping from the higher floors. A Helen Gurnee jumped to her death from the seventh in 1954; in 1962 Pauline Otton leapt from the ninth, killing herself and an unsuspecting passer-by, George Gianinni, 65, walking in the street below. The same year Julia Moore took her own life jumping from the eighth floor. These led to bars being added to some of the windows on the highest levels.

There are connections with many murders, solved and unsolved. The hotel was frequented by two serial killers, ‘Night Stalker’ Richard Ramirez, a Satanist apprehended in 1985, and Austrian murderer Jack Unterweger, who arrived in 1991 and started a killing spree before his capture in Miami in 1992. Never solved was the murder of Goldie Osgood, 79, in

1964 strangled and stabbed to death in a sexual attack, in a room on the seventh floor. Sixteen years earlier, Elizabeth Short ‘the Black Dahlia’, was rumoured to have consumed her last drink at the hotel bar before she turned up dead at Leimert Park, a few miles away in 1948 [FT334:48-54].

Earlier, in September 1944, Dorothy Jean Purcell, 19, gave birth at the Cecil and threw her newborn infant out the



TOP: CCTV footage of student Elisa Lam in the Cecil’s lift; she was later found dead in the hotel’s main water tank. ABOVE: The Cecil’s once gorgeous art deco lobby – still being used by filmmakers.



GHOSTWATCH

Facing such a list, it is important to retain a sense of proportion. Since it opened, many thousands of people have stayed in the Cecil without trouble or incident. Surrounded by crime-ridden streets in a deprived neighbourhood, instances of social deviancy, particularly homicide and suicide, might be anticipated.

Regarding accounts of ghosts, the briefest analysis reveals a strong hearsay component to many reports, most of which amount to little more than complaints of a disturbing atmosphere within certain rooms and 'weird' and 'creepy' noises at night. Multiple ordinary causes may be postulated for unusual sounds, caused by aging fixtures and fittings along with echoes through the rambling structure arising from a continual through-put of guests. Ghostly 'screaming' and 'screeching' sounds may be attributable to noise of purely human origin in a busy hotel with communal bathrooms, or extraneous cries penetrating from outside. Auto-suggestion and bad dreams might be only expected for sensitive and unduly nervous persons staying under the roof of the Cecil (if any venture to spend a night), stimulated by other guests telling stories and conducting impromptu séances to contact troubled spirits. It is likely a percentage of reports simply originate with hoaxers exhibiting a perverse or macabre sense of humour.

Reflecting on the sad litany of fatalities at the Cecil, one is reminded of the words of historian GM Trevelyan: "On this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passion, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another – gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone like ghosts at cock-crow."

THE HAUNTING OF CASH'S WELL

Deprived of the chance of staying, there was a certain measure of relief in leaving behind the Cecil with its tales of a body in a cistern and strange-tasting water, and returning to the UK to learn of a haunted well reposing in the autumnal tranquillity of an Essex woodland. Many extraordinary claims currently circulate concerning 'Cash's Well', a ruin to be found among trees in Langdon Hills Country Park, Thurrock.

Once renowned for its allegedly curative waters, Cash's Well is achieving fame again, thanks to the efforts of the Essex Ghost Hunters, the group promoting claims of the site being actively haunted by the man who constructed it. Amid these confident assertions (which identify the group as Spiritualists rather than ghost hunters) they report undefined paranormal energies swirling all over the site and strange lights and smells. Without



ABOVE: Devilish graffiti on an exterior pillar of the Cecil Hotel.

deciding the matter, I wonder if the same psychological processes suspected at the Cecil in California are at work here, profoundly affecting the perceptions of visitors engaging in nocturnal tours.

Reportedly, participants may experience emotional outbursts, floods of tears and dramatic personality changes. Some complain of being pushed around or scratched by unseen forces. Others experience strange physical reactions, suffering twitching limbs and hands.

The Essex Ghost Hunters attribute these to the spirit of Mr Edwin Cash, the man who established Cash's Well a century ago. Recorded as the licensee of the Angel in Islington, he spotted a money-making opportunity in the supposed medicinal qualities of water with a high mineral content extracted from a well sunk by a Mr King at the rear of Hovell's Farm, Vange, Essex. Involved from 1902, it was not until retiring from his pub in 1919

that Cash embarked in developing his commercial interests, founding the Vange Water Company. The company bottled and sold the water for public consumption via local chemists and stores. The business thrived and by 1920 the press eagerly reported claims of these alleged medicinal properties. This success led Cash to sink a further three wells, the last being the one surviving today. Then, in 1924, the enterprise collapsed, forced to cease operations after a pollution scare over leakage from nearby drains serving a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. Edwin Cash died in 1931, and now it is averred his spirit returns to haunt the site of his last well, and is proving contactable in séances arranged by the Essex Ghost Hunters.

Intriguingly, the group claims it has discovered "all sorts of information" about "Mr Cash", even "his class number at school and the house he was in". Russell

ALAN MURDIE

Old, a spokesman for the group, was quoted regarding his own troubled personal communications with the spirit, stating of “Mr Cash”: “He doesn’t like me and I don’t particularly like him,” and that “There’s no love lost between us because of what I call his water”. So, to placate “Mr Cash”, the group makes offerings of two pence pieces, depositing them in the well. Russell Old explained: “He was money-orientated, everything was money with him and he was a businessman.”

Readers of this extensively covered story may realise that independent corroboration has yet to emerge and demonstrate that any spirit is actually communicating, or that it is even the original “Mr Cash”, despite Mr Old assuring visiting journalist Elliot Hawkins, “He’s here now”. (*D.Mirror*, 7 Sept; *Essex Live*, 1 Oct 2019 and many others).

Facing such claims, the independent investigator can only stand back like the conjuror’s assistant and assess proceedings as they unfold. Either Mr Old is a genuine medium, in which case verifiable information unknown to all present might be sought, or explanations are to be found elsewhere. At present nothing yet establishes “Mr Cash” as anything more than a subjective hallucination or, alternatively (presuming any entity is present) that it corresponds with the once-living personality of Edwin Cash. Nor is there evidence that this is causally linked with other anomalies being experienced by visitors to the area guided by the group.

The group cites one man adversely affected, “a guy who was seven feet tall, stocky, broad... the nicest guy you’d ever spoken to,” who, on ascending a hill, “got so aggressive... cursing and throwing his arms around, so we had to turn him around. He wasn’t under attack; he was just feeling the energy.” Unfortunately, as operators of cinemas and carnival attractions can confirm, physical size and prowess guarantees no protection against mental suggestion. I recall the late Sir John Mortimer describing his public school boxing master collapsing in a screening of the film *The Mummy* (1932). One group member admits, “A lot of it is psychological, but you’ll get a lot of people who don’t want to stand with their backs to the window or by the door,” and people “who just burst out in tears”.

In the circumstances, several things caution against accepting visitor reactions as *prima facie* evidence of a haunting. Psychological priming is already in place by the group declaring the place haunted. As with the infamous MacKenzie tomb of Greyfriars Cemetery, Edinburgh, nothing much was apparently reported around Cash’s Well until ghost hunters commenced tours. The power of suggestion should



ABOVE: Cash’s Well, in Langdon Hills Country Park, Essex, has recently gained a haunted reputation.

not be underestimated, since lonely or unfamiliar locations, especially isolated and eerie woodlands at night, can affect people in many ways.

Wells are a great inspiration to the imagination and for those who dream up supernatural stories. WB Yeats wrote *At the Hawk’s Well*, a play mixing elements of Irish mythology concerning curative waters and Spiritualist belief. Ghosts dwelt in the depths of wells imagined by MR James, classics being ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, ‘A School Story’ and his jokey ‘The Wailing Well’. Even postulated as a psychological condition is ‘Bathophobia’ – fear of lakes, pools, wells and tunnels – perhaps one with more substance than many anxiety conditions bandied around (see www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=12212).

More widely, pools and wells attract legends and lore, being perceived as dangerous and liminal spots and contact points for supernatural beings and other worlds. A few entities are benign, (e.g. the angel periodically disturbing the healing waters of the pool of Bethesda, John, 5:2-4) and others are neutral, such as White Ladies (e.g. Lady’s Well, Whittingham, Northumberland, possibly a relic of Marian veneration before the Reformation), or the ghostly dismembered smuggler whose body was dumped down a well at Happisburgh, Norfolk.

Many more entities are implacably hostile, dragging victims to their deaths, overlapping with monsters and sirens in mythology. (Coleman O Parsons (1933) *Folklore* vol. 44, no.3; *Our Haunted*

Kingdom (1973) by Andrew Green; *The Folklore of East Anglia* (1974) by Enid Porter).

Although no records of haunted wells were obtained in Essex from a questionnaire survey by folklorist LF Newman in 1952 (see ‘Folklore Survivals in the Southern ‘Lake Counties’ and in Essex: A Comparison and Contrast’ by LF Newman and EM Wilson, *Folklore* (1952), vol.63, pp91-104) there are traces of haunted well legends at St Osyth. The disputed wall writings of Borley Rectory, Essex, also included an enigmatic message ‘Well-tank bottom me’ suggesting human remains in a cistern (though this interpretation has been vigorously challenged).

Altogether, probably no similar-sized patch of woodland in Britain would not boast a high proportion of odd experiences if the percipients came in the same numbers and in the same psychological state of expectant excitement. Yet the inability to currently verify such experiences as paranormal does not necessarily mean such investigations are in vain or lack significance. Fundamentally, many everyday subjective experiences remain incapable of strict scientific proof, no methodology being in existence to confirm them.

Perhaps someday technology will be developed to make this possible; if ever so, we will achieve a major step in settling the reality or otherwise of many alleged paranormal phenomena. If nothing else, the controversy as to their nature indicates the importance of respecting subjective experience both from a research standpoint and personally.

MEDICAL BAG

The Berlin Wall in tablet form, human home brewery, and plague returns to China – plus, could food shortages end the taboo against cannibalism?

REPURPOSING THE BERLIN THE WALL

Ainsworths of Marylebone, London, the homeopathic pharmacist that has held a Royal warrant since 1980, sells tablets made from ground-down fragments of the Berlin Wall, charging £5.25 for a one-gram vial of lactose tablets and £114 for 500ml in liquid potency (23 per cent alcohol). The “remedy” is made by grinding down pieces of the Cold War relic and diluting it multiple times with lactose, water and alcohol. Said to convey a “spiritual force” capable of “breaking down walls” between people, the tablets or tincture are alleged to be effective in the treatment of asthma, headaches, aggression, depression, and insomnia. Professor Edzard Ernst, emeritus professor of contemporary medicine at Exeter University, said the tablets were “not only bonkers but ineffective.” Another critic asked: “What therapeutic advantage does Berlin Wall have over ordinary garden wall, or Spaghetti Junction concrete?” The Prince of Wales is patron of the Faculty of Homeopathy. *telegraph.co.uk*, 20 Aug; *D.Mail*, 21+22 Aug 2019

AUTO-BREWERY SYNDROME

A 46-year-old American construction worker started producing beer in his own gut after a fungal growth produced high levels of yeast. His rare condition was only discovered in 2014 after he was pulled over by police on suspicion of drink driving in North Carolina. Hospital tests showed a blood-alcohol level of 200mg/dL, equivalent to consuming 10 alcoholic drinks, five times over the drink-drive limit, although he denied he had drunk any alcohol. The strange symptoms of auto-brewery syndrome (ABS) are described in the *British*



TOP: Ground-down fragments of the Berlin Wall are being used in homeopathic remedies. ABOVE: Rats are caught and tested for plague in Sichuan province.

Medical Journal. Researchers reveal how the once healthy, light social drinker began experiencing all the effects of alcoholism despite becoming teetotal. The man first began experiencing uncharacteristic episodes of depression, “brain fog” and aggressive behaviour in 2011 after taking a course of antibiotics for a thumb injury.

The true cause of his symptoms only became apparent years later, following his arrest for suspected drink driving. After being discharged from hospital, the man sought treatment at an Ohio clinic where a stool sample revealed the presence of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (aka brewer’s yeast) and a related fungus. An apparent cure

was affected by anti-fungal therapies and probiotics to treat the gut micro-flora. We are told that there have only been five cases of ABS in the last 30 years. *D.Telegraph*, *D.Mail*, 22 Oct 2019.

BLACK DEATH BACK

At least three people in China are being treated for plague. It’s the second time the disease, the same one that caused the Black Death in the 14th century, has been detected in the region – in May, a Mongolian couple died from the disease after eating the raw kidney of a marmot, a local folk health remedy. The first two recent patients, from the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia, were diagnosed with pneumonic plague by doctors in Beijing. The third victim, a 55-year-old hunter, fell ill with bubonic plague on 5 November after killing and eating a wild rabbit, and was being treated in the city of Huade.

Plague is caused by *Yersinia pestis* bacteria and transmitted through flea bites and infected animals. A 2018 study suggested it’s not just rats that are responsible – the mediæval Black Death may have spread by human fleas and body lice. The disease can develop in three different forms. Bubonic plague causes swollen lymph nodes; septicæmic plague infects the blood; and pneumonic plague infects the lungs. Pneumonic is the most virulent and damaging; left untreated, it is always fatal.

The last know major outbreak in China was in 2009, when several people died in the town of Ziketan in Qinghai province on the Tibetan plateau. From 2010 to 2015, more than 3,248 cases of plague were reported worldwide, including 584 deaths. The three most endemic countries are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar and Peru. In the US, there have been anywhere from a few to a few dozen cases

244: REFRIED BEANS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

The delicious, versatile and highly nutritious Mexican dish of refried beans – *frijoles refritos*, to give them their Spanish name – consists of beans which have been fried and then (and this is the thing that makes them so special) fried again, for double the flavour.

The “truth”

Refried beans are not refried. They are fried once. The beans are boiled, to cook them, and then they are fried, to turn them into that lovely mash. The reason we in the anglophone world call them refried beans is possibly a mistranslation from the Spanish which appeared in a Massachusetts newspaper in 1897. The writer seems to have assumed that the prefix “re-” meant “again,” as it would in English (and sometimes in Spanish), rather than acting as an intensifier: hence, beans that have been re-fried. What the Mexicans actually mean is that their beans are “well fried”, or “very fried”. It was an understandable mistake, since the word *refry*, to mean fry something and then fry it again, already existed in English and is found in 19th century recipe books. To add to the confusion, some foods are of course routinely refried – notably chips, which are at their best when fried to cook them, and then fried again just before serving to crisp them.

Sources

A Curious History of Food and Drink by Ian Crofton (Quercus, 2014); www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2012/10/refried-english.html; culinarylore.com/food-history/how-did-refried-beans-get-their-name/

Disclaimer

Linguists and chefs alike are encouraged to batter us via the letters page, if any of the above is wrong.

Mythchaser

There is no such thing as a sabretooth tiger, a reader was surprised to learn. It seems that what us ignoramuses call the sabretooth tiger is not related to tigers, or indeed any modern cats. Therefore experts won't refer to *Smilodon* as a sabretooth tiger. So the animal did exist... but it wasn't a tiger.



of plague every year. In 2015, two people in Colorado died, and the year before there were eight reported cases in the state. Having caused close to 50,000 human cases during the past 20 years, the plague is now categorised by the World Health Organisation as a re-emerging disease.

There is currently no effective vaccine, but modern antibiotics can prevent complications and death if given quickly enough. However, a strain of bubonic plague with high-level resistance to the antibiotic streptomycin, which is usually the first-line treatment, was seen recently in Madagascar. Untreated bubonic plague can turn into pneumonic plague, which causes rapidly developing pneumonia, after bacteria spread to the lungs. [CNN] 13 Nov; D.Mail, 19 Nov; D.Telegraph, 20 Nov 2019. 2019.

SHOULD WE EAT EACH OTHER?

At a talk at the Gastro Summit in Stockholm last September, Swedish behavioural scientist Magnus Söderlund posed a controversial question: Can you imagine eating human flesh? As global temperatures continue to rise, the consequences for agriculture could cause food to become scarce, which might force humans to consider alternative forms of nourishment. Those sources might include insects like grasshoppers or worms, but they could also include

corpses, Söderlund said. By gradually getting accustomed to the taste of our own flesh, he added, humans might come to view cannibalism as less taboo. “I’d be open to at least tasting it,” Söderlund later told the State Swedish Television channel TV4. In less than a decade, the world could fall short of feeding every person on the planet by 214 trillion calories per year, or about 28,000 calories per person.

The idea of using cannibalism to supplement our food supply isn’t new. Think of the 1973 dystopian thriller, *Soylent Green*. In 2018, Richard Dawkins wondered if it would be possible to grow meat from harvested human cells in a laboratory. Like Söderlund, he called the idea “an interesting test case” that might demonstrate whether humans could overcome the “yuck” factor in order to do something they considered moral, like reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

There are, however, many less grotesque ways to ensure we have enough food in the future. A recent report from the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that a quarter of all food worldwide is lost or wasted. By improving the way food is harvested, stored, packaged, and transported, the report said, producers could address food shortages. *businessinsider.com*, 13 Sept 2019.



ABOVE: Cannibalism: hopefully this isn't the shape of diets to come.

STRANGE CONTINENT

Unfazed by Brexit, **ULRICH MAGIN** scours the papers for the weirdest news stories from across Europe...

BIG CATS, AGAIN

Jutland in Denmark was the scene for many puma encounters throughout last summer and well into the autumn of 2019. The first reports appeared in March. On the 17th, a large cat was seen in Rye and the next day in Funder. In May, there were further encounters in eastern Jutland; a German tourist saw a puma on 1 May at the E20 motorway exit at Vamdrup near Kolding, and a woman jogging saw the beast on 11 May in Vejle. The witnesses were doubted, and police suspected an escaped exotic pet or a lynx. The third observation of the month was made by a Dane who insisted “he had seen a wild cougar – or another ‘large’ cat” at Hylke, near Skanderborg, on 21 May. In July, a deer killed by a bite was found in the region and its death was blamed on the mystery cat. There were reports of more encounters into September.

In an overview of the scare, *Midtjyllands Avis* (6 Sept 2019) referred to the previous reports and published a map showing sightings near Tjørring, Funder, Lind, Rye, Hylke, Vejle, and Vamdrup. In early September, the puma was photographed, but later analysis by a biologist showed it had only been a common house cat.

A TV channel undertook a hunt for the big cat and new observations came in from Tørring, north of Vejle. The last reference I could find was a 5 October report in the *Midtjyllands Avis* which begged for an “end to the puma panic”. *Dagens.dk*, 20 March, 4 Sept; *Aftonbladet*, 11 May; *DR*, 13 May; *Dagens.dk*, 22 May; *Extra Bladet*, 26 May; *Midtjyllands Avis*, 6 July, 6 Sept, 5 Oct; *Randers Amtstavis*, 11+13 Sept 2019; *shz.de*, 16 Sept 2019.

As the Denmark puma scare finally ended, a tiger was spotted near a filling station



ABOVE: Mojito, the green retriever pup born in Wermelskirchen, Germany, sleeping with his eight white siblings.

at Zwiesel in the Bayerwald, Bavaria, on the evening of 14 October 2019, when a woman motorist saw it crossing the road in front of her. She informed the police who searched the site but found no animal traces. The woman said the tiger was so large that it stood higher than her car’s bonnet. As a circus was camping near the encounter site, it naturally came under suspicion, but proved to have a strict no-animals policy. Police investigator Horst Fischl suggested the cat could not have been a lynx, as these are too small and look completely different. In press reports a week later, the woman driver had become male, the animal had been seen in darkest night, and police suggested it had only been a big dog – a second sighting or a garbled version of the first one?.

On the day of the last news report, a Romanian lorry driver called emergency services after he had run over a tiger on the A65 motorway near Edesheim in the Palatinate, Germany.

Edenkoben police rushed to the accident site, only to discover the “tiger” was a roe deer. The problem in this case, however, was not one of misperception but of language – the driver thought the German word for ‘roe’ was ‘tiger’. *Bayerwald-Bote*, 15 Oct 2019; *Merkur*, 23 Oct; *ludwigshafen24.de*, 23 Oct 2019.

ANIMAL TALES

In May 2019, the first bear seen in Portugal for 176 years was spotted by experts from the Spanish government of Castille and León in the north east of the neighbouring country. *La Vanguardia*, 8 May 2019.

In Germany, animals also appeared in unexpected places. For the first time in 13 years, a bear entered Bavaria via the Alps, and was photographed by a wildlife camera near Garmisch-Partenkirchen, while a young seal, some six months old, was rescued in Hamburg harbour near Tiefstack. Seal officer Olaf Nieß explained that the animal was wounded and “seriously undernourished”.

It was taken to the North Sea seal nursing station at Friedrichskoog. *Die Rheinpfalz* 8 Oct; *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* 26 Oct 2019.

At the end of August, day flies came to the Diesenbach quarter of Regenstau in Bavaria in their millions, where they died and covered the streets in piles up to half an inch deep. Authorities warned that the smell “of the dead bodies might last for weeks” as locals removed the flies with shovels. In 2018, a similar invasion had hit Schwandorf, also in Bavaria. Day flies, as the name implies, live only for a single day once they have hatched, and then die in swarms. Ernst Fohringer, a local, said that the phenomenon occurred almost every year in his community. *Münchner Merkur*, 1 Sept 2019.

Even stranger was the green golden retriever born on 16 October 2019 in Wermelskirchen, Germany. Joanna Justice’s dog Melody gave birth to eight white pups



– and a mint green one! The green wonder was baptised ‘Mojito’. “I was a little worried at first, but all nine puppies are doing just fine,” said Justice. Christian Dimitriadis, a vet from Düsseldorf, said such births were rare, but easily explained by the presence of the chemical biliverdin in the dog’s placenta, which causes the greenish colour. Over the course of the next few weeks, she explained, Mojito’s hair would grow and lose its unusual tint. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 Oct 2019.

And then there was the “giant hamster” reported by a cab driver on the night of 8 September. The 49-year old man hit the brakes to avoid colliding with the animal in Attaching, near Freising in Bavaria, but crashed straight into it, causing 5,000 Euros’ worth of damage to his vehicle. It was, he told police, “a giant hamster with very big teeth.” The cops came and found – a dead wild boar. They checked but found the man was completely sober. *Passauer Neue Presse, Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9 Sept 2019.

EURO-UFOS

Four (possibly more) strange lights were seen and filmed hovering over the disputed Crimea on 23 August 2019 and “left the witnesses bemused”, as the text says on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kmmGdczbzCI, posted 29 Aug 2019). “This event was captured by three separate cameras, and the footage shows a group of lights hovering over the city of Kerch, Crimea, but in the last clip that we see these lights break formation.” The whole looks very much like the infamous Greifswald UFOs from Germany, which turned out to be signal flares on parachutes deployed in military manoeuvres.

According to A.r.i.a., the *associazione ricerca italiana aliena* (Italian Alien Research Association) of Sondrio, founded by the ufologists Angelo Maggioni and Antonio Bianucci, a video taken of a



ABOVE: The ‘ice eggs’ that appeared on Hailuoto Island in November 2019.

UFO over the city in July 2019 shows a “dynamic of jumps, stretching and temporal space lengthening” that can only be explained by “the use of an anti-gravity propulsion system,” which “excludes the possibility that it may be a purely terrestrial object”. Of course, it is impossible to determine from the film the precise way in which these UFOs use this supposed technology, and not everyone is convinced that the objects are extraterrestrial in origin anyway. *La Provincia di Lecco*, 9 Oct 2019.

SNAKES ALIVE!

Snakes were in the news all over the continent. Starting in the Canary Islands, it was reported that introduced California king snakes were feeding on the archipelago’s extremely endangered giant lizards, posing a real danger to the protected animals. The snakes can grow to more than 2m in length and were first reported on Gran Canaria in 1998. On the Spanish mainland, a number of large serpents were captured, such as the 2.5m (8ft) Montpellier snake found in La Cala del Moral on the Costa del Sol. Three large snakes were caught by the Group for Nature Protection in Málaga, one of them a 1.6m (6ft) horseshoe whip snake. A

python more than 3m (10ft) long was captured in Almería, another of 1.5m (5ft) in a canal of the Río Segre, and yet another 1.5m (5ft) specimen Lleida. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 Aug 2017; *La Vanguardia*, 11+18 June, 8 Sept, 9+11 Nov 2019.

FREAK WEATHER

Four people, two of them children, died and 140 were injured in a thunderstorm, in which lightning struck the iron cross and climbing chains on Mount Giewont, in the Tatra Mountains, Poland, on 22 August. The mountain is a Catholic place of pilgrimage. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 24 Aug 2019.

Large balls of snow, the smallest the size of a chicken’s egg, the largest as big as a soccer ball, appeared on Marjaniemi Beach of Hailuoto Island in the Finnish Sea. Risto Mattila, who photographed the phenomenon, said he had seen nothing like it in 25 years. Meteorologist Jouni Vainio said that air and water at temperatures of around 0°C, a shallow beach and a strong wind had created the perfect conditions for an ice cover to form around pebbles and driftwood. Other experts think the ‘ice eggs’ are the result of drift ice which is washed around by wave action – so take your pick. Similar balls were discovered two years

ago at Nyda, Siberia, and on the Chicago banks of Lake Michigan. *debate.com.mx*, 9 Nov; *spiegel.de*, 11 Nov 2019. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 20 July 2019.

GERMAN FAKERS

A 48-year-old woman without any medical training who had posed as an anaesthesiologist in the Heilig Geist Clinic in Fritzlar, North Hesse, was arrested in November. It seemed she had photoshopped her false credentials and her ‘treatment’ had already killed four patients and left eight more seriously impaired. It’s not the first time that such a thing has happened in Germany. A few years ago, the imposter Gert Uwe Postel managed to become head of a psychiatric clinic.

In Gelsenkirchen, a 13-year-old pupil told police that a man had approached her and threatened her with a knife before attacking her with a syringe and injecting her with an unknown substance. However, a hospital examination showed that she had injured herself, with no attacker being involved. *Kölner Stadt-Amzeiger*, 2+16 Nov 2019.

DRUG-DEALING DUMMIES

A drug dealing gang made up of 12 people from Bonn, Germany, was caught after they affixed stamps of insufficient value to a parcel sent through the German post. The mailman returned the package to sender, a business completely unrelated to drug smuggling, which reported the matter to the police. The real dealers were arrested and stood trial in Bonn in August. *Bonner Rundschau* 2 Aug 2019.

Meanwhile, in Italy, wild boar unearthed a parcel containing 20,000 Euros’ worth of cocaine near Montepulciano in Tuscany. Police were already eavesdropping on the gang whose stash it was when they heard them complaining about the “bloody boar” – definitive proof that the gangsters had hidden the drugs. *n-tv.de*, 14 Nov 2019.



KARL SHUKER finds local testimony aiding in scientific discoveries – and rediscoveries



DEER ME, WHAT A DISCOVERY!

The silver-backed chevrotain *Tragulus versicolor*, also known as the Vietnamese mouse-deer, has been rediscovered after almost three decades of apparent extinction. Despite their mouse-deer moniker, chevrotains are not true deer. In fact, they constitute a discrete taxonomic family of ungulates (hoofed mammals), whose modern-day members are all very small and with the exception of a single African species are entirely confined to Asia, but in prehistoric times were much more diverse in both size and distribution. They are also characterised by a pair of tiny fangs. Weighing less than 10lb (4.5kg), no bigger than a rabbit, and distinguished from other chevrotains via its silver-coloured rump, the silver-backed chevrotain is the world's smallest living species of ungulate. This may have assisted it in remaining hidden from scientific sight, because the last confirmed report of it was in 1990 (when a hunter shot a specimen and donated it to scientists).

The silver-backed chevrotain was originally described in 1910, and was traditionally categorised as a subspecies of the greater Malay chevrotain (aka greater mouse-deer) *T. napu*, but was reclassified as a distinct species in its own right in 2004 and is found only in Vietnam. It was rediscovered when a team of scientists led by Vietnamese scientist An Nguyen, associate conservation scientist for the Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), examined a series of camera

traps that they had lately set up in a dry coastal lowland forest in southern Vietnam where locals had claimed that this elusive species still existed (no sightings have ever been reported from wet tropical forests), and were delighted to find photographs of living specimens snapped by the cameras.

In order to safeguard its survival and protect it against poachers, the team has not released specific details regarding where and when the cameras were set and the photos confirming its existence obtained. Several further cameras were subsequently set up, and over a period of several months more than 2,000 photos of this species were obtained. The GWC has drawn up a list of the 25 most wanted lost species that it hopes may still survive and will one day be rediscovered, and the silver-backed chevrotain is the first mammal on this list to be rediscovered. Other species on it include such iconic forms as the pink-headed duck, Himalayan mountain quail, pondicherry shark, and Miss Waldron's red colobus monkey.

www.itv.com/news/2019-11-11/minature-fanged-deer-rediscovered-tiptoeing-through-vietnam/ 11 Nov; www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2019/11/silver-backed-chevrotain-mouse-deer-reappears-vietnam/ 11 Nov 2019.

...AND A FISHY FIND IN AUSTRALIA

Taking notice of local testimony also assisted

LEFT: The Vietnamese mouse-deer, not extinct and snapped by a camera trap.

in the startling scientific discovery of a quite sizeable new species of marine fish in Australia recently that had actually been hiding in plain sight. In November 2019, Queensland Museum ichthyologist Dr Jeffrey W Johnson announced that a local fisherman had sent him a photograph of a type of grouper he had never seen before. He asked the fisherman to send him the fish itself, only to learn that it had already been sent to a fish market. Further enquiries revealed that this scientifically mysterious grouper was a tasty fish that was commonly caught, sold, and eaten by locals in southeastern Australia, who referred to it as the rockrod. This surprising discovery led Johnson to a fish market in Brisbane's North Lakes area, where he was able to procure five specimens of rockrod, which were then passed on to Queensland Museum geneticist Dr Jessica Worthington Wilmer. She ran a series of molecular and genetic tests on samples taken from them, and also compared them morphologically with grouper specimens of other species in a number of museums around the world. The results of these analyses confirmed that this form of grouper did indeed constitute a valid new species, now formally dubbed *Epinephelus fuscomarginatus* by Johnson and Wilmer in a *Zootaxa* paper. Just over 2ft (60cm) long and predominantly pink, but with dark-brown edges to its caudal, anal, and soft dorsal fins, the rockrod can be found at depths of around 720ft (220m) off the central section of Queensland's Great Barrier Reef. Interestingly, Johnson had been alerted by various locals to this fish's existence prior to receiving the fisherman's photograph,

but had not previously been able to locate specimens for examination.

www.independent.co.uk/news/science/australia-new-fish-species-grouper-eating-fishing-queensland-a9184371.html 4 Nov 2019; <https://biotaxa.org/Zootaxa/article/view/zootaxa.4674.3.2>

LEFT: Jeffrey Johnson with the mysterious 'rockrod'.



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ANIMALS FIGHT BACK

Trigger-happy dogs (and a cat) hospitalise hunters, while a kamikaze slug wreaks havoc in Japan...

ANIMAL SABOTEURS

• A power cut on the Japanese island of Kyushu in May 2019 brought 30 trains to a standstill, and the disruption of 12,000 journeys. Investigators blamed a kamikaze slug whose electrocuted remains were found inside a load disconnecter beside the tracks. A similarly ill-fated mollusc achieved notoriety in Darlington, north-east England, when a slug crawled inside a traffic-light control box in 2011, short-circuiting the mechanism and causing traffic chaos. Such incidents are reminiscent of the Large Hadron Collider shutdown in 2016 after a weasel entered a high-voltage transformer, ill-advisedly chewing on some wiring. *Guardian*, 14 Sept 2011; *BBC News*, 29 April 2016, 22 June 2019, *Sunday Express*, *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 June 2019.

• Another power outage in Japan with potentially more serious results took place at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2013. A rat appears to have short-circuited a power switchboard, which then triggered the power cut, shutting down cooling systems. The Fukushima plant seems beset by ill luck; in 2011 a massive tsunami caused meltdowns and a major radiation leak. To reassure the public, the Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco) issued a photo of a dead rodent inside the switchboard unit. However, this appears to have backfired, and critics argued that the rat incident highlights the fragility of the plant. *BBC News*, 20 Mar 2013.

• Meanwhile, a major project to bring high-speed Internet access to the state of Kentucky has been delayed yet again, with KentuckyWired company representatives blaming ravenous squirrels for having



TOP: Matt Branch (left) had a leg amputated after being shot by a dog. ABOVE: Molly, a Labrador puppy, shot Tina Springer in the thigh.

chewed through cables. KentuckyWired is now four years behind schedule, and state lawmakers are refusing to grant additional funds, querying the company's explanation of an "abundance" of rogue squirrels hell-bent on disrupting the project. *[AP]* 19 June 2019.

• A kitchen fire that broke out in a house in Stanford-Le-Hope, Essex, turned out to be the work of a home-alone husky. The dog inadvertently started the blaze when it reached up to a kitchen counter and turned on a microwave oven

containing a pack of bread rolls. The home owner happened to check a camera feed on his phone, saw smoke coming from the kitchen and dialled 999. Essex Fire Service arrived on the scene to find considerable smoke damage to the kitchen – but the dog was unharmed. Geoff Wheal, Watch Manager at Corringham Fire Station, said: "Clearly this is a very strange incident... it demonstrates that microwaves shouldn't be used to store food when they aren't in use... Animals or children can turn them on more easily than you might think." *Independent*, 4 Dec 2019; www.essex-fire.gov.uk/

HUNTING 'ACCIDENTS'

• A hunter in Arkansas was gored to death after a deer he believed he had shot dead got up and attacked him. Thomas Alexander, 66, was hunting near the Ozark mountains when he shot the buck and watched it collapse. Assuming the animal was dead, he went to check on the body, at which point the deer stood back up and attacked him, causing multiple puncture wounds. He managed to call his wife, who rang the emergency services, but he was declared dead later in hospital. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, which was searching for the wounded animal, advises that hunters wait half an hour before approaching a shot deer, just to be sure it was dead. *BBC News*, 25 Oct; *D.Telegraph*, 26 Oct 2019.

• A man from Louisiana has returned to work with a false leg after being shot by a dog. Matt Branch, 30, a former college football star, was hunting ducks last December when a Labrador retriever stood on his shotgun, releasing the safety catch. The dog, Tito, had jumped into the back of the off-road buggy where Branch had placed his gun. It went off as he walked around the car, blasting a hole in the vehicle and striking his left leg. He recalls a numbness in his leg before he passed out from blood loss. His friends managed to get him to paramedics. He twice went into cardiac arrest, but was revived. Surgeons amputated his leg. *Times*, 20 July 2019.

• Tina Springer, 44, was shot in the thigh after a puppy jumped on a gun inside a pickup truck that had stopped at a railway crossing in Enid, Oklahoma, on 3 October. Molly, the Labrador puppy, was frightened by a passing



train and leapt on a .22-calibre handgun resting on top of the truck's console. Molly belongs to the driver, Brent Parks, 79, who made a tourniquet for Ms Springer's leg with his belt. The woman, who is Mr Parks's carer, was expected to recover. In 2015, a woman in Indiana was shot in the foot by her dog. Allie Carter, 25, was hunting waterfowl when her Labrador, aptly named Trigger, stepped on her 12-gauge shotgun. *koco.com*, 6 Oct; *D.Mail*, 7 Oct 2019.

- *FT* has often reported similar incidents. Here's another, from 14 years ago.

Ivailo Nedkov's hunting trip in Drianovets, Bulgaria, took an unexpected course after he found himself struggling with his normally faithful hound. As Nedkov, 35, tried to pick up a dead quail, the dog grabbed it and refused to let go. Nedkov tried to fend off the animal with the butt of his gun, but the hound deftly found the trigger and pulled it with his claws. Nedkov was peppered with buckshot, but survived. *News of the World*, 18 Sept; *Independent on Sunday*, 25 Sept 2005.

- It's not just dogs; cats do it too. After shooting at rats in a barn on 14 April 2003, Josiah V Boughman, 15, of Tuscarawas, Ohio, laid his Powerline Air Rifle on a picnic table, neglecting to switch on the weapon's safety feature. One of the family's cats jumped on the table and somehow pulled the trigger on the weapon, grazing the teenager's ribcage. He was rushed to hospital, but his injuries were not life-threatening. And Joseph Stanton, 29, of Bates Township, Michigan, was cooking in his kitchen on 8 March 2005 when one of his cats knocked his 9mm handgun off the kitchen counter behind him, discharging the weapon and shooting him in his lower torso. He too was not seriously hurt. *Canton Repository*, 19 April; *Metro*, 23 April; *Guardian*, 30 April 2003; [AP] 10 Mar 2005.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

FARRAGOS OF FORTEANA

A new year, and time for a bit of fortean heresy.

Charles Fort founded the modern discipline of forteana with his heroic work in newspaper and periodical archives in the early 20th century. He gathered, in British and American libraries, snippets of the apparently impossible from around the world. I have spent much of the last five years in the same archives – digitised now – researching folklore and 'the unexplained'. When I go back and reread Fort with a more personal knowledge of the sources I have the impression that he was too trusting. This might seem an unfair criticism of the ultimate trust-no-one think-for-yourself author. However, browsing through newspapers published between 1830 and 1930, you see how frequently later-contradicted rumours and made-up stories appeared in print. The nature of these rumours or inventions was that they easily got caught up in the clipping system, whereby a story taken from, say, a small circulation Nebraska newspaper was reported in one of the large Chicago dailies and then appeared, latterly, in publications in Argentina, Australia and India. The locals might have got the joke or relished a sly dig at a parish personality, or were perhaps just better placed to judge the truth of what they read on the basis of what they had already heard. That capacity disappeared once the

story was uprooted and published in other states and distant countries. Fort had worked as a journalist and knew how penny-a-liners and even established newspaper writers made things up, particularly when there was a deadline looming.

I'll give, as an example, a story that recently crossed my desk, which might have interested

Fort had he encountered it: "Saw the Devil at Mt Vesuvius" (a gem found by Kay Massingill). This enjoyable farrago appeared in 1908 in a Washington State paper. The author describes in striking detail how a ship's crew watched, from the sea, a 16ft (5m) monster throw a man into the crater of Mount Vesuvius: a man that some of them knew as a corrupt ship-owner from Liverpool. The story would have fooled me had I not read the same tale about five or six times before in sources going back

centuries. An old yarn had been wheeled out and polished up into new copy for a West Coast paper. A new generation of forteans is much more critical. I still haven't read Martin Shough and Wim Van Utrecht's *Redemption of the Damned: Vol. 1: Aerial Phenomena, A Centennial Re-evaluation of Charles Fort's 'Book of the Damned'*, but I am looking forward to the experience. I am also especially interested to know what this kind of useful scepticism would do to 19th-century Bigfoot reports... **Simon Young's *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies* is out now from Gibson Square.**

A SHIP'S CREW
WATCHED A
16FT MONSTER
THROW A MAN
INTO THE CRATER
OF MOUNT
VESUVIUS



The ufological and the political

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research



ABOVE: Cold War paranoia in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – or angry FT readers in pursuit of a columnist?

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

There seems to be an unwritten rule in fortune musings that says we don't do politics. Except that we do, as long as said politics happened a long time ago, and the only toes being trodden on are safely dead. Consider, for instance, the truism that the UFO waves of the 1950s were in part a reaction to the Cold War – an observation accepted by all but the most intransigent nuts-and-bolters. Martin Kottmeyer floated an interesting hypothesis some years ago that UFO waves were a reaction to times of national shame, in other words political events. And military ones as well – but as we know from Clausewitz, war is politics carried on by other means. It's a tricky idea to navigate, because the cause of one person's shame may be a trigger for someone else's pride. The paranoid, reds-under-the-bed style of McCarthyism, for instance, seems to me to be a shameful episode in American history, because of the personal injustices and constitutional desolations it produced – which not coincidentally occurred in the early days of the Cold War. But there was no lack of support at the time for the antics of the Junior Senator for Wisconsin, and he has his defenders even today. It's not hard to defend the reasonableness of being on the *qui vive* for treacherous Communist infiltrators and influencers, while seeing McCarthy's demagoguery and its consequences as a blight upon the Earth.

The extent to which Kottmeyer's hypothesis is defensible is a subject for another time – needless to say he got flak for it from the usual suspects. As a student of politics for more than half a century – I think it may have been Christine Keeler who first

awoke my fascination – what interests me currently is the probability that Lionel Trilling's prognostication (or prophecy) in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) has been confirmed: that "Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind we will not like." And for a swathe of indefatigably vocal people, this is exactly what has happened. *Everything* has become, in these people's eyes, subject to political interpretation, disapprobation, and in extreme cases vicious caricature and censorship. Vote to leave the European Union? Overnight you've become a knuckle-dragging, ignorant, low-achieving racist, it seems. Vote for Trump? Gun-toting deplorable for sure. My three or four loyal fans will recall that my merely pointing out that, to my mind, there's something dubious about the concept of a 'feminist' glaciology – cost me a terrible wigglin' in FT's letters pages. The point I was making is that ufology had better keep its sentries' eyes peeled for an approaching horde of angry Twitterati howling down the field's perceived political shortcomings, lack of diversity and failures of representation.

Was that a rant? Probably, and most likely an eruption borne of watching, in great frustration, actual politics in the US and the UK, and much of Europe too, go shamelessly off the rails. Although my intention is quite sober: to point out that *all* ufology has a context, which can't help but be in part political. It may take a decade or two to dissect plausibly the effect of our present political *imbroglio* on ufology – but that it will have an effect of some kind is surely beyond doubt. We shall see. And I should live so long, already.

NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION

After we'd all been reassured by the *New York Times* and Luis Elizondo and assorted others that the Pentagon's AWSAAP and AATIP programmes had been busy investigating UAPs (alias UFOs), and by other yet more excitable persons that Disclosure was upon us, and perhaps we'd soon see an alien shaking hands with the US President on the White House lawn, the Pentagon has finally found a bucket of cold water and emptied it right over all of that. Neither AWSAAP nor AATIP had anything to do with UFOs, says Pentagon spokesperson Susan Gough to veteran researcher John Greenwald Jr, alias the Black Vault. Ms Gough seemed a bit puzzled about the previous impression given by the Pentagon's front desk. Ms Gough also reiterated that Elizondo had nothing to do with AATIP, which is somewhat at odds with his line. Okay. So now we wait another couple of years to see if the official tune changes yet again? Surprise me.

See www.theblackvault.com/documentarchive/the-pentagon-corrects-record-on-secret-ufo-program/.

THEM OLD-TYME ALIENS DO DOSEY-DO

Jason Colavito, blogging on 22 November: "At the end of the day, maybe the ancient astronaut theory and ufology are all about daddy issues. The concepts come pre-loaded with the notion that punitive and/or loving parental figures will descend from the sky to teach all of Earth's naughty children important lessons, but it seems that the emotional need for parental validation in the form of government 'disclosure' of UFO secrets represents another facet of the same mindset. The same people who tirelessly assert that government is an evil nasty punitive asshole who takes away all our toys and always treats our siblings better than us are also the same people who so desperately want daddy's love that they believe only a government endorsement will validate their belief in the UFO faith. This is *prima facie* absurd since government endorses so many ideas that they clearly have no faith in and which they denounce as lies, but deep in their shriveled hearts they still think that if government agrees to something it must be true."

Previously, Colavito has denounced Freud as "bullshit" – no argument from me, there. But I'm inclined to think he may have a point here. Pray respond on no more than half a sheet of paper.



Scramble, UFO! Part Three: The Team

JENNY RANGLES concludes her investigation of the MoD's involvement in 1950s UFO sightings

In 1986, I interviewed Cyril Townsend Withers, who wanted a last chance to tell me about something that had bothered him since 1953. He was terminally ill and wanted to go on record “before it is too late” as “there is little they can do to stop me now”. Although ‘they’ did still try.

Withers had remained loyal to the MoD and waited for the 30-year period for data release to elapse before he let me visit him at home and record his story before he died.

In early 1953, he was an RAF science specialist working on developing radar and electronic counter measure technology. He climbed the ranks in MoD science and retired as a Wing Commander. He told me that his sighting was investigated by a science team working on anomalous ‘UFO’ reports at Farnborough – something related to him in confidence by a scientific intelligence officer when Cyril asked why he had been shut out of his own story. “Apparently I trod on some toes in 1953 and was not supposed to have been told about the investigations at Farnborough.” Indeed, even in 1986 he was instructed not to talk about it to me. I feared he might back out of the interview, but he bravely went ahead.

Like ‘Wilbur’ Wright (**FT386:26-27**), Withers was aboard a brand new aircraft – in this case a Canberra with its interior empty so as to accommodate top secret equipment for tests. Introduced just after the war, the Canberra was the first jet aircraft to cross the Atlantic non-stop. It was designed to operate at height and set a world record above 70,000ft in 1957. Indeed, Withers actually flew over 63,000ft during his UFO encounter – a record at the time, but kept secret because of the nature of the mission.

He told me: “I was asked to test some new electronic counter measure equipment. Because it was important work, a pilot and I were given a prototype... Pared down we could fly much higher... and put the equipment through the motions.” They had taken off from Boscombe Down and were over Salisbury Plain when “just after noon on a cloudless day... on a northwesterly heading my radar picked up a target at five miles behind us, pacing us like an echo... We switched off the system, reset it, and did a number of internal checks. This did not clear the target. Now we knew that something really was following us... virtually impossible at this height.”

They considered Soviet snooping, but airspace had been cleared of known traffic. Observing from the gun turret, Withers saw

“an object trailing behind. It was round and silvery, reflecting sunlight like a giant mirror... Although we got to 225 knots the object stuck with us, so I recommended ‘a big radius turn’ in order to shake it. The object vanished from the radar now because the system was only operating in a rearward-facing mode. However, the object was not visually absent for long. Within moments it was dead ahead. As we came out of the turn, we flew towards the glinting object and closed the gap very fast.” For about 30 seconds on a collision course.

Withers described it: “Silvery, very thin in body shape. Overall it appeared a remarkably flat oval without any sign of wings or windows just the faintest hint of a tail fin at the rear... we were just stunned... preparing to pull out and fly around the object. It never gave us the chance. Suddenly the thing just shot vertically upwards without acceleration going from zero to an incredible speed in moments. It climbed up like a rocket... We soon lost sight of it far beyond any height that we could hope to emulate.”

After they landed, they recorded the event: “Then I was instructed to work with the radar manufacturers. We stripped the equipment and reassembled it. There was nothing wrong.” So the matter was passed ‘up channel’. Withers expected a full debrief but was advised that at Farnborough that these “things” were being studied as part of “a new programme by scientific intelligence”. When he asked why they never contacted him, he was told: “Remember the real threat comes from the Russians, not UFOs.” But, he confessed, “I got the definite impression that our sighting was of interest to sources other than the channels that I dealt with.” Despite asking around, Withers only discovered that the new team at Farnborough was handpicked to study evidence by “assessing incoming reports”. He added: “I even heard whispers they had developed a working assumption that alien craft might be coming to Earth. But it was made very clear that none of this was for public discussion.”

The timing here may be key. Churchill ordered a UFO study after RAF planes and a US aircraft carrier saw UFOs during Operation Mainbrace, a NATO exercise over the North Sea in September 1952, just weeks after the sightings over Washington DC that caused major changes in US policy. So in the six months immediately preceding this incident over Salisbury Plain rapid restructuring was occurring on both sides of

the Atlantic. So this case – given the tech involved – was likely subjected to intense scrutiny at Farnborough. We also know that Ed Ruppelt, head of Project Blue Book, said that in early 1953: “Two RAF intelligence officers who were in the US on a classified mission brought six single-spaced typed pages of questions they and their friends wanted answered.” At the same time, the US involved the CIA. A memo just before that Washington RAF visit said: “It is strongly urged that no indication of CIA interest or concern reach the press or public.”

In January 1953, when the RAF visit occurred, the CIA convened a top-secret panel in Washington; but Ruppelt and Hynek, the Blue Book officers, though asked to brief the panel, were excluded from sessions where decisions were taken. A lot of attention was focused on making UFOs seem amusing so they could be investigated covertly. Clearly, the plan was to put research on both sides of the Atlantic into secure hands and stop public questions. Hence Flt Lt Withers experienced the warning to keep out of his own case.

Even in the late 1960s, when working for the MoD as a senior science officer, Withers tried to have discussions with Whitehall but was told to leave it to Farnborough, where it would appear research still went on.

Days after the CIA panel met in Washington and a few weeks before the incident over Salisbury Plain, on 13 January 1953, a new signal was sent to all senior RAF personnel that looks as if it was meant to protect the secret Farnborough team. It ordered that any sightings involving “RAF personnel” must only be reported by “officers commanding units”. They must “do so immediately... direct to the Air Ministry (technical intelligence units)” – whence the two RAF officers had been sent to Washington. Senior staff were told: “It is essential that [information] release should be controlled officially,” and that “Personnel are to be warned that they are not to communicate to anyone other than official persons any information about phenomena they have observed.”

Withers, aboard that Canberra, was flying into a perfect storm that would prove a test case for this new edict. What we may be seeing here is the birth of the UFO cover-up and the reasons for it. But why would it still continue in 1986 – 17 years after the US government, with whom the MoD collaborated, had officially ended its UFO study and closed down Project Blue Book?

SHOWERS OF STONES

DR KAREN STOLLZNOW examines the case of the the Guyra Ghost, the stone-throwing spook that became a 1920s newspaper sensation and Australia's most famous poltergeist

Half a century before the infamous cases of the Columbus and Enfield poltergeists, there was the Guyra Ghost, a poltergeist that terrorised a sleepy town in rural Australia and caused a media sensation across the country. The case was widely reported and documented at the time, both at home and abroad, and the curious events can be pieced together from contemporary newspaper articles.

On 1 April 1921, the Bowen family awoke to the sound of “tremendous thumpings.”¹ “Showers of stones” then rained down on the galvanised iron roof of their cottage on the outskirts of Guyra, in northeastern New South Wales.² For over a month, council worker William Bowen, his wife Catherine, and their three children were plagued by apparent poltergeist activity. The stone-throwing attacks increased until eventually “every window in the house – a four-room weatherboard cottage – had been smashed”.³

The next night, the Bowens contacted the Guyra police for assistance. Constables Stennett and Taylor went to the house to investigate the matter.⁴ Their only clue was that, the previous day, a strange man had chased 12-year-old Minnie Bowen across the paddock of the family's property. He pelted her with pebbles as she ran away from him, but he disappeared before she reached home.⁵ Armed with this information, the police suspected the prowler was to blame for the subsequent attacks. They soon heard stones thudding against the walls of the farmhouse. As they looked around, they noticed that one of the windows had been smashed by a small object such as a pea rifle bullet. A search ensued, but no culprit could be found.

The peculiar activity continued. The occupants of the house complained of knockings on the inside and outside of the house. Unseen hands thumped on the walls, which shook from the force. Rocks were thrown at the house, smashing the windows. The rocks ranged in size from tiny pebbles to half a brick. Much of the activity seemed to involve young Minnie. Stones crashed through her bedroom window and fell upon her bed. Heavy blows upon the walls followed her from room to room. The constables returned the following evening,



Stones crashed through her window and fell upon her bed

this time assisted by Sergeant Ridge, while a band of civilians kept an all-night vigil around the house. The police initially attributed the attacks to the man who had supposedly pursued Minnie. They soon proposed another theory: that “larrikins”, mischievous young boys, were responsible, firing stones with catapults at the house as a prank. But an intensive search of the house and property revealed nothing.

The Bowen family called on their neighbours and townsfolk for help. The band of civilians grew to 40 volunteers that night, then 80 the next.⁶ Now they were armed with rifles. Led by Sergeant Ridge, the sentinels formed a human fence around the cottage to prevent any would-be attacker from getting close to the cottage. Other

LEFT: A newspaper report on the case from *The Mail* (Adelaide), 9 April 1921.

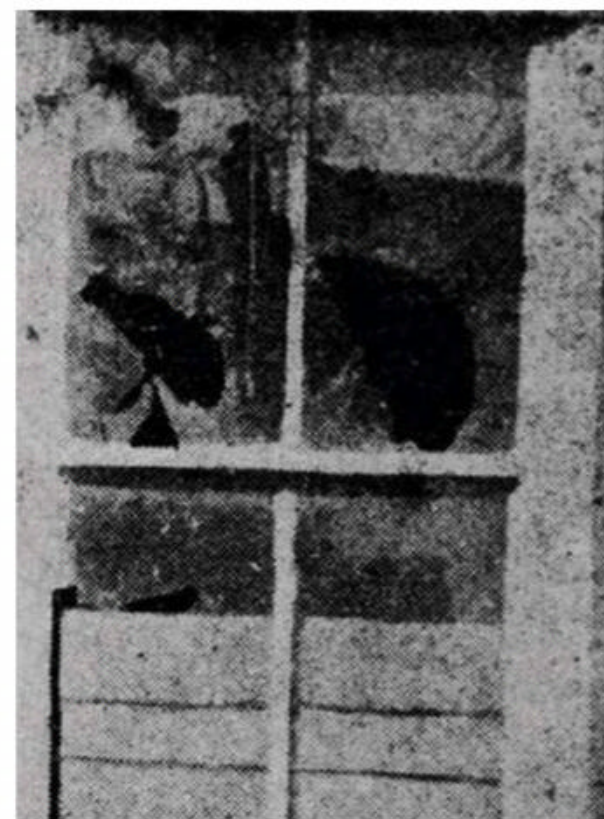
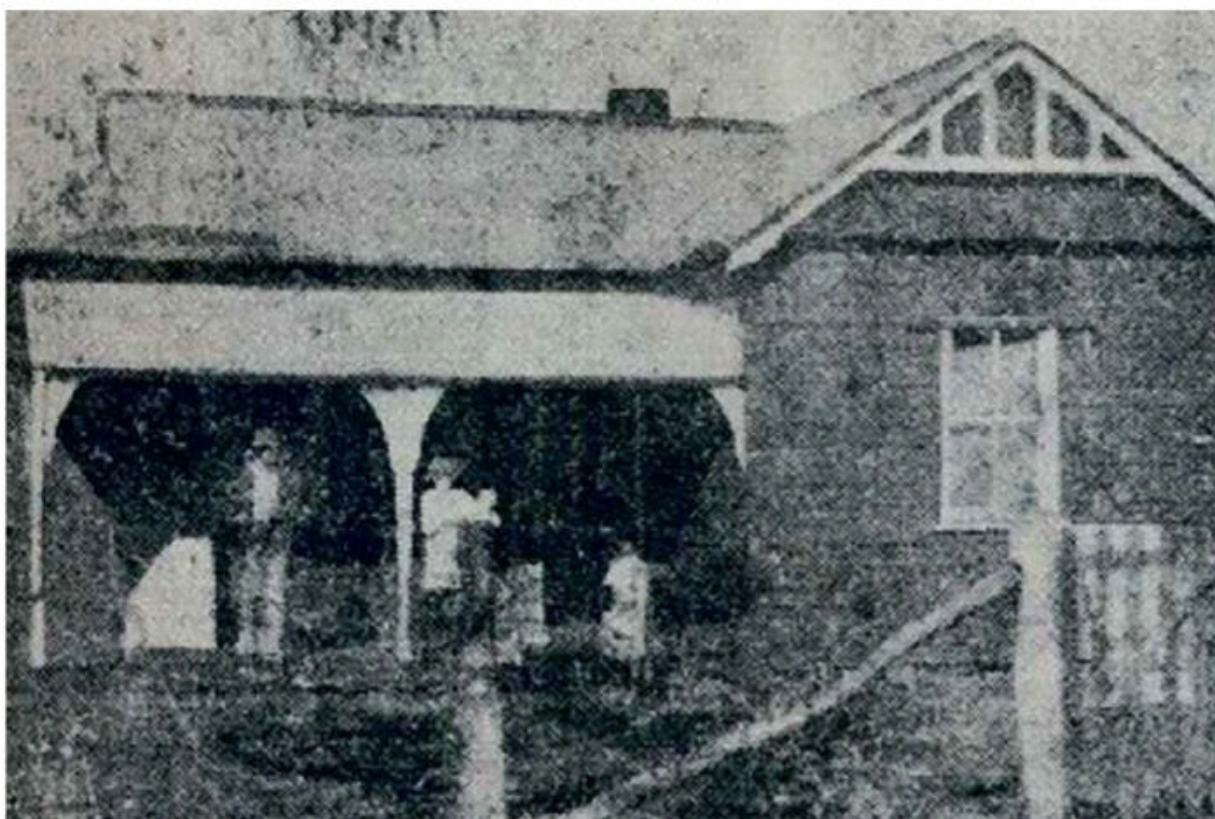
men patrolled the fields; using a powerful searchlight they swept the beam across the house and surrounding countryside. The group soon heard sharp bangs and thumps that were “sufficient to shake the cottage to its foundations.”⁷ Constable Taylor remarked that it sounded “just as if someone had a pumpkin in a sugar bag and was thumping the wall with it.”⁸ To those standing outside the house, the noises seemed to come from within, but for those inside the house, they appeared to emanate from outside. The police isolated the family in one room and guarded them closely, but the activity persisted. At one point, a constable sat down on the bed beside Minnie in her bedroom, and as he did so, stones rained down on them.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

At the same time, the small community was traumatised by another strange occurrence. Guyra resident Mrs Doran, an 82-year-old Irish woman, had disappeared. She was last seen wandering in a field on 5 April, carrying a potato in each hand. A farm worker saw her in a paddock and asked where she was going. She replied, “I’m taking the spuds to old Ireland.”⁹ According to the worker she then “topped a rise and was gone”. Search parties combed every yard of the district, but no trace of her was ever found; or so the story goes.¹⁰ Her disappearance was believed to be somehow linked to the events at the Bowen cottage.

In response to the mysterious stone-throwing, members of the community began arming themselves and even sleeping with loaded guns in hand. Predictably, this led to disaster. One woman purchased a revolver to protect her family from the “spook”. She placed it on a bedside table, where her five-year-old son found it. Thinking it was a toy, he accidentally shot his older brother.¹¹ The little boy survived, but was left with a bullet in his skull that could not be removed. The nervous locals also managed to shoot at a horse, a dog, grazing sheep and cattle, and numerous trees.

Night after night, the men of the township threw a double cordon around the cottage. Night after night, the stone-throwing and thunderous rappings on the walls continued.



ABOVE LEFT: The Guyra 'mystery house' in 1921. ABOVE RIGHT: A broken window in the house. BELOW: Minnie Bowen and her father William Bowen.

Then they began occurring during broad daylight. After a day of working the fields, the entire Bowen family returned home to find the heavy shutters and battens of the house, and boarded-up broken windows, torn down and piled high on the patio. The police discovered the boot marks of a man leaving the house, but they couldn't find the culprit.¹² The phenomena soon spread to neighbouring homes. The McInnes and Hodder residences were bombarded with stones. The damage to the latter family's house was so extensive that they abandoned it. Passing motorists were even attacked by the stone-thrower. A stone hit a visiting motorcar. Upon inspection, the stone was found to be marked with a red cross.¹³ Sick residents attributed their illnesses to the "uncanny doings" at the Bowen home.¹⁴

With no culprit found and apparently "no human agency" involved, locals began to come up with their own explanations for the phenomena. Mr Cox, the owner of the house, believed that the activity heralded the second coming of Christ, who would occupy the haunted cottage.¹⁵ Many people sought a supernatural explanation for the happenings at Guyra. In 1921, Spiritualism was still the height of fashion. World War I was still fresh in the public memory, and many had lost loved ones whom they hoped to contact via spiritual means. It was thought that the stone-throwing "spook" was a poltergeist (German for "noisy ghost"), a type of spirit responsible for physical disturbances, such as loud noises or objects – like stones – being thrown. In alleged poltergeist cases, the activity often seemed to focus around a child approaching adolescence, and usually a girl. In the case of the Enfield Poltergeist (1977-79), the activity seemed to surround 11-year-old Janet Hodgson (FT32:47-48, 33:4-5, 166:39, 229:58-59, 288:18, 329:51), while 14-year-old Tina Resch was the apparent focus of



the 1984 Columbus Poltergeist (FT83:16, 190:38-44, 198:76). One theory is that the physical disturbances are produced subconsciously by the victim's energy. The "supernatural attacks" of the Guyra Ghost were believed to target 12-year-old Minnie Bowen. The activity seemed to follow her, while no stone-throwing occurred when she was out of the house. Journalists noted that Minnie seemed less perturbed about the occurrences than other members of the household.

A Special Reporter for the *Sunday Times* was dispatched to the home to acquire a firsthand account of the mysterious happenings. He considered Minnie to be an unusual little girl, and described her as follows: "Minnie is tall, thin and dark, with peculiar dark, introspective eyes that never seem to miss any movement in a room. When

she speaks to you she never smiles, and seems to look beyond or through you. She is not a clever child in the accepted sense, and is backward and in a low standard for her age at school. If quiet and unusual, she seems just a normal little girl in most respects, except she has a rather uncanny aptitude for anticipating questions, almost before they are asked, and answering them."¹⁶

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

The cottage in Guyra became famous as the "House of Mystery" and attracted many visitors, including psychic investigators. On 13 April, Ben Davey, a Spiritualist from the nearby town of Uralla, visited the house. Upon hearing that there had been a recent death in the family, Davey became convinced that the cottage was haunted by the spirit of Minnie's deceased stepsister, May Hodder. The 21-year-old was the daughter of Catherine Bowen and her former husband Job Hodder. She had died on 26 January that year, leaving behind her 18-month-old son, Clifford. The little boy's father had never been identified, and there was speculation that it was William Bowen, who at 32 was much younger than his 47-year-old wife Catherine. Other rumours circulated that May had died during a botched abortion, or, unmarried and ashamed at her situation, she had ended her own life, although local newspapers reported she had died of congenital heart disease. Minnie was now largely responsible for the care of the infant. The Spiritualist theory was that the stress of school on Minnie, combined with taking care of the baby, had triggered the poltergeist activity.

When Davey suggested that the Bowen family could be in the presence of May's ghost, there was a sudden knock on the wall. He encouraged Minnie to act as a medium. Minnie then communicated with her sister,

receiving a message uttered in a “whisper” that no one else could hear. Davey later relayed the incident to journalists.

“I said to the girl, ‘If the knock comes again, ask if that’s your sister May.’

“She replied, ‘I can’t speak to my sister – she’s dead.’

“I coaxed her, saying, ‘Speak, dear. Even if your sister can’t speak she might knock again.’

“I hardly spoke the words before the knock came again. I can tell you my hair stood up on end. But I continued to coax the girl, and about five minutes later a third knock came. Then the little girl crossed and blessed herself, put her hands up in supplication, and said, ‘If that’s you. May, speak to me.’ She was silent a moment and then began to cry.

“I asked her, ‘Did May speak?’

“She said, ‘Yes, May spoke.’

“I said, ‘What did she say?’

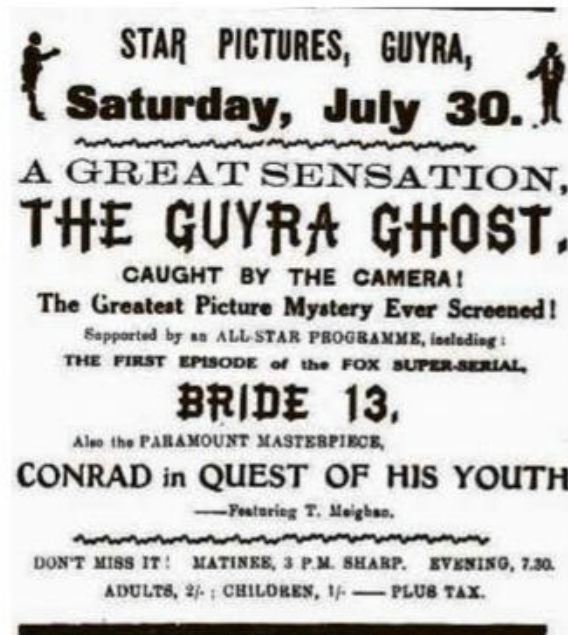
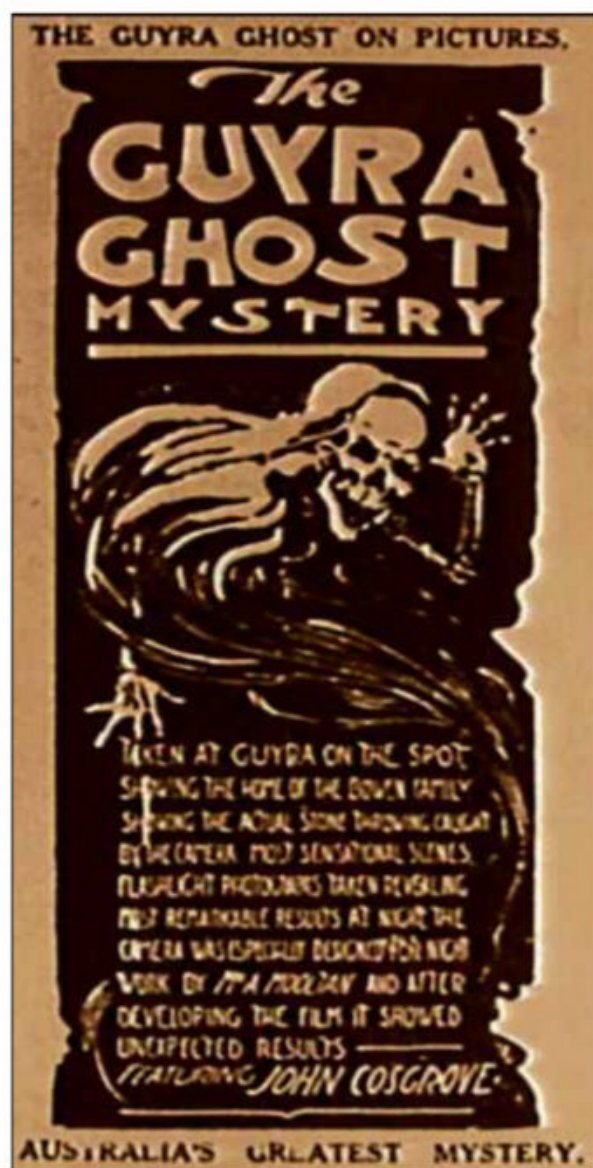
“She said, ‘I can’t tell you. The message is for mother.’

“She then went over and laid her head on her mother’s lap, crying. Her mother said, ‘Well, tell the gentlemen what she said.’

“The little girl looked up and said the message she received was this: ‘Tell mother I am perfectly happy where I am, and that your prayers when I was sick brought me where I am, and made me happy. Tell mother not to worry, I’ll watch and guard over you all.’”¹⁷

The Guyra Ghost attracted the attention of Mr Harry Jay Moors, a South Sea island trader who happened to be in Sydney on business. He was a personal friend of Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Like the latter, he had a strong interest in the paranormal. On 18 April he announced his impending arrival in Guyra with a telegram: “Chief of Police, Guyra. Please reserve room, best hotel. Leaving tonight”.¹⁸ Moors was granted access to the Bowen house for several nights to observe the phenomena. He and his five assistants removed portions of the roof to create lookout posts, set up elaborate traps to detect hoaxers, and kept the family under close surveillance.¹⁹ Undeterred, the ‘spook’ continued its mayhem. Moors left after four days, convinced that “the strange occurrences were not the product of trickery”, but “the result of poltergeist activity”.²⁰

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: “Mr Moors, in discussing the matter yesterday, said the people of Guyra resented very strongly some of the reports which had gone out from the township concerning the affair, because of their ceaseless vigils and very exhaustive efforts to get to the bottom of the disturbances. Mr Moors speaks from his own experience of these ceaseless efforts on the part of the people of the district, and the police and others, and says that any criticism levelled against them is quite unfair. He had spoken to the girl, who had impressed him as being normal,



ABOVE: An advert for *The Guyra Ghost*, a 1921 film based on the unfolding case, and a newspaper notice for a screening at Star Pictures, Guyra.

although, according to one party, her mother had described her as being highly imaginative.”²¹

The story also drew the interest of actor, comedian, and stuntman John Cosgrove. This inspired *The Guyra Ghost Mystery*, a silent film produced just weeks after the events. The Bowen family appear in the movie as themselves, re-enacting the events on location at the cottage in Guyra. Cosgrove directed the film and also starred as the character of Sherlock Doyle, a spoof of Mr Moors. In one scene, William Bowen took out his gun, loaded it, and demonstrated how he had “shot the

ghost”.²² The film was advertised as “five reels of laughter,” indicating that it was a comedy.²³ It performed poorly at the box office. No copy of the film exists and it is now considered lost.

CONSTABLE HARDY INVESTIGATES

With no end in sight, the New South Wales government dispatched a team of detectives from Sydney. They arrived in Guyra on 21 April. Constable Hardy, who had at one time lived in Guyra, led the team. They sought a more mundane cause for the activity. Hardy began a careful investigation of the situation but quickly “arrived at the conclusion that the manifestation was worked by five or six persons, with the object of getting possession of the house.”²⁴ The theory that the culprit was trying to get the Bowen family to leave the cottage hinged on the fact that rental accommodation was scarce in the district at the time. At this point, the police were anxious to close the case. The household had been under constant surveillance for weeks, and many hours of police time had been devoted to solving the mystery. This had taken its toll; one Guyra police officer suffered a nervous collapse and was sent away “for a rest”. The *Northern Star* reported: “Though the police are convinced of the human agency of the affair they have no clue to the perpetrators, and say they hope the thing was fizzled out and that they are done with it.”²⁵

But Constable Hardy was not entirely “done with it”. Some saw Minnie as the target of the attacks, while others, including Hardy, suspected she was instead the perpetrator. It did not escape his attention that the events had begun on April Fool’s Day. On 23 April he claimed a major breakthrough. During a stakeout of the cottage, Hardy and Sergeant Ridge took up a position on the southern side of the house. Mr Starr, a reputable local farmer, watched from the northern side, where he witnessed Minnie throw several stones at the cottage. She at first denied any knowledge of stone-throwing. But when confronted by Mr Starr she confessed “that she caused some rappings on Saturday night and threw small stones on the roof of the house to frighten her sister-in-law.”²⁶ She revealed that she had created the knocking sounds by striking the walls with a stick at night when people were keeping watch outside. She remarked: “I was always careful that I was not watched or seen by anybody.” But she denied responsibility for anything else that went on in the house. However, the police were content that the mystery was now solved. So were the newspapers. The *Northern Star* announced, “Ghost theory collapsed”, claiming the whole affair was just a childish prank.²⁷

MINNIE TAKES A TRIP

Despite the determination that it was all just a hoax, the thumping and stone throwing in the cottage continued into

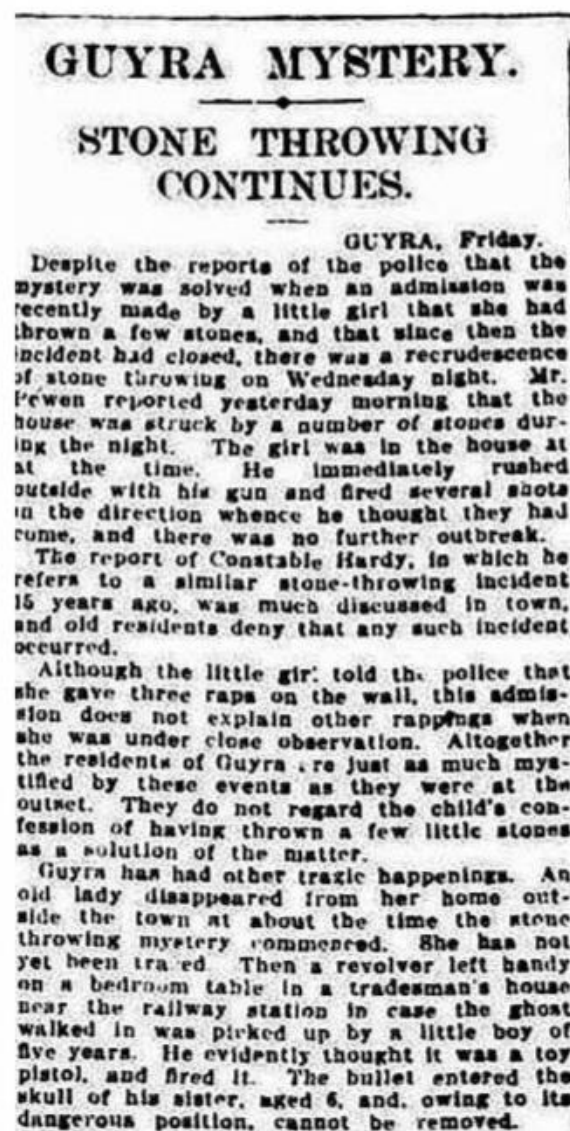


ABOVE LEFT: Minnie Bowen. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Minnie's grandmother's house in Glen Innes, where Minnie was sent to stay in May 1921; the phenomena followed her. **BELOW:** A newspaper report on the resumption of stone-throwing following a brief hiatus and Minnie's admission that "she had thrown a few stones".

May. In their desperation, Minnie's parents sent her to stay with her grandmother, Mrs Shelton, and her Uncle Alfred Shelton, at their home on Church Street in nearby Glen Innes. Baby Clifford, Minnie's charge, also accompanied her. In Minnie's absence, life in Guyra returned to normal, although the activity followed her. During dinner the night of 11 May the phenomena resumed with a "shower of gravel on the roof."²⁸ Violent banging on the walls followed. However, a neighbour who was having dinner with the family when the noises occurred insisted he had seen Minnie hit the walls with her elbows, a claim that she firmly denied. Later that night, ornaments flew off the shelves and windowpanes were smashed by rocks the size of walnuts.

Constable Stewart and several members of the local Glen Innes constabulary were summoned to investigate. Police and neighbours circled the house, but no one saw a stone hit the window of Alf Shelton's bedroom, breaking a pane of glass and becoming entangled in the curtain. It was an ordinary stone, similar to others on the footpath outside. Stewart and his crew kept a close watch on the house that night. They heard knocking and banging sounds, but influenced by Hardy's dismissal of the case, they came to the conclusion that the girl was responsible, and left. In their statements to the police the next day, residents and neighbours reported that the stone-throwing and thumping sounds continued until midnight. A Mr Marsden reported: "The noises were like the sounds caused by an axe being struck heavily against the wall."²⁹ The phenomena continued on and off for several months. By August, the townsfolk of Glen Innes were fed up, and Minnie's grandmother was told that the girl must leave town. Minnie was duly sent home to Guyra. Upon her return, the activity decreased gradually, until it eventually ceased altogether.

"The noises were like the sounds caused by an axe being struck against the wall"



The events in Guyra that year led to copycat phenomena. In the months that followed, the "Guyra Ghost" was spotted all along the east coast of Australia. In one case, stones rained down upon houses on Trafalgar Street, in the Brisbane suburb of Woolloongabba. On 25 November, 22-year-old Frederick Joseph Cook was caught red-handed as he threw a stone towards a local house.³⁰ He was arrested and confessed that he had been infatuated with the Guyra Ghost saga. Ironically, he had been the person who reported the "poltergeist" to the police, and had assisted them in their nightly vigils to catch the culprit. Cook was fined £10 for breaking two windows, and released with a warning.

THE AFTERMATH

Over the past century, the events that took place in Guyra during 1921 have been the subject of much conjecture. Sceptics accept Minnie's confession, and extrapolate that all of the phenomena must have been faked. After all, the activity did begin on April Fool's Day. One theory is that her prank was an example of "pious fraud"; that is, Minnie fabricated some phenomena to increase belief in her otherwise true story. Some believe it was a hoax and that certain members of her family were also involved, or that the Bowens themselves were victims of a hoax. Others believe that the police, who were eager to close the case, coerced the girl into confessing. It is often argued that Minnie's confession doesn't account for the extent of the phenomena, or for the fact that she was under close observation when much of the activity took place, thereby proving her innocence – not to mention that the events were witnessed by numerous neighbours, townsfolk, visitors, and police. And what of that strange man who chased her through the paddock and pelted her with rocks that first day? No matter which



ABOVE: The remodeled Guyra 'Mystery House' today.

explanation we choose to believe, we are left with many unanswered questions. Modern accounts often conclude that the events remain “unexplained”, “unsolved” or “inexplicable”, and that the Guyra Ghost is still a mystery.

Minnie Bowen grew up, married farmer Frank Ernest Ince in 1928 and left Guyra to live in the nearby town of Armidale. The couple had two sons, one of whom died in infancy. Frank fought in World War II, during which time Minnie served in the Women’s Agricultural Security Production Service (WASPS), a labour force that tended and harvested wartime crops.³¹ Throughout her life, Minnie never spoke about the Guyra Ghost again, although

Many believed that Minnie had life-long psychic abilities

many believed that she had life-long psychic abilities. In particular, she was said to have the power of telekinesis. Her niece Diana Brady (Clifford’s daughter) once said: “She could make a piano play, or a chair lift on

the other side of the room.” Minnie’s sister Mary Ellen reported that Minnie could “move furniture and lift objects without touching them.”³² Sadly, her story ended in tragedy. In 1970, 62-year-old Minnie was crossing the road when she was struck and killed by a passing car on the Grafton Road in Armidale.³³

Today, Guyra is a sleepy country town again. There are a few reminders of the “spook”, such as the Guyra Ghosts, the local rugby team (motto: “Frightfully Good Rugby”). The lonely cottage still stands, although it has since been remodelled, while the current occupants have not seen any sign of ghosts. The Shelton house in Glen Innes was demolished several years ago. As the 100-year-anniversary of the Guyra Ghost approaches, it is a story that many townspeople would rather forget, even though the participants have long since died. The last remaining witness to the events was Minnie’s sister Mary Ellen Jones, who passed away in 2015, just two days after celebrating her 104th birthday. The *Guyra Argus* reported the death of its oldest citizen as the close of a chapter in the town’s history, noting that her “family achieved notoriety in 1921 with a series of unexplained occurrences at their home, which became known as the Guyra Ghost Mystery.”³⁴

And for many people, the legend of the Guyra Ghost remains just that: a mystery.

❖ **DR KAREN STOLLZNOW** is a researcher, host of the *Monster Talk* podcast, and the author of *God Bless America*, *Haunting America*, and *Would You Believe It?* She has a PhD in linguistics from the University of New England, Australia.

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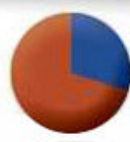
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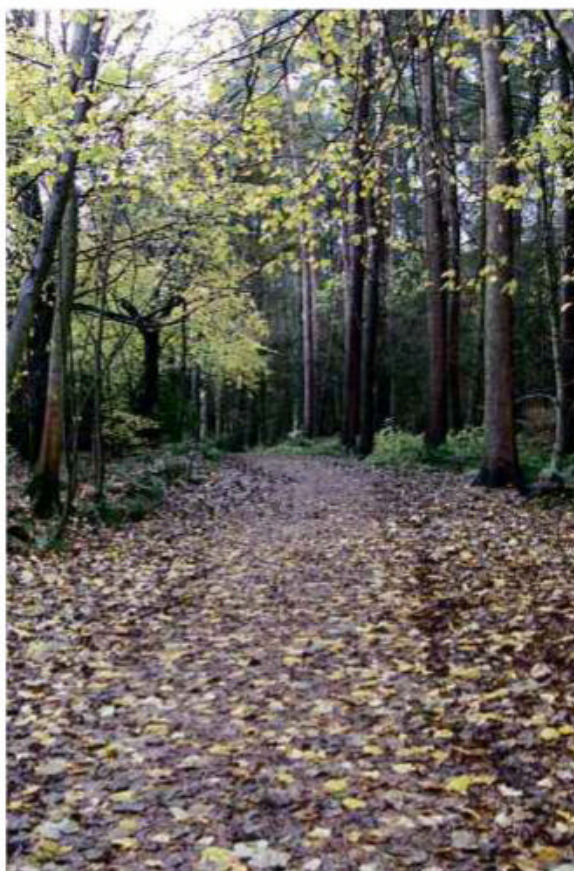
UNCANNY EXPERIENCES IN ENGLAND'S WOODS

In a special extract from his new book, **PETER A McCUE** examines reports of people having strange experiences in the woods and forests of England – from seeing strange lights and hearing phantom hoofbeats to encountering Bigfoot-like monsters just outside Sheffield

My recently published book *Britain's Paranormal Forests: Encounters in the Woods* examines reports of people having strange experiences in wooded areas of Great Britain. Sadly, with population growth and development, Britain has lost much of its natural woodland over the years, and threats continue. So far as paranormal and UFO events are concerned, I can't say that our woods and forests attract a disproportionate amount of activity, although it wouldn't surprise me if that turned out to be the case. While much of the book consists of in-depth case studies of the woods and forests most often associated with anomalous activity (like Rendlesham Forest in Suffolk), this article focuses on lesser-known wooded areas that have allegedly hosted strange phenomena, presented in a more-or-less north to south order. In respect of South Yorkshire, two reports of interest came to my attention too late to be mentioned in the book. But they're discussed below.

BOLAM LAKE COUNTRY PARK, NORTHUMBERLAND

Bolam Lake Country Park is about nine miles (14km) west of Morpeth and covers an area of some 65 acres (26ha). The lake itself is surrounded by woods. In his book *Man-Monkey* (pp121-6), Nick Redfern explains that members of the Devon-based Centre for Fortean Zoology (CFZ) visited the area in January 2003 to investigate sightings of a Bigfoot-like entity.¹ At one point, the CFZ team found that nearly all of their electronic equipment was suffering from a loss of power, even though they'd tested it the previous night and had charged up or replaced batteries where necessary. The witnesses they interviewed included a mother and her son who had seen a huge creature only days before. It had stood motionless in the woods, near a car park they were crossing at the time. They had



Lights were seen flashing and hovering above the woods

felt intense fear and quickly left the area. On the afternoon of the second day of their investigation, the CFZ team liaised with members of a South Shields-based investigative group called Twilight Worlds (TW). Around 5pm, with the help of car headlights, five of them saw an enormous humanoid figure run from right to left. It disappeared for a few moments, and then ran back again.

Of course, one might wonder whether at least some of the sightings were generated

LEFT: Bolam Lake Country Park, where a Bigfoot-like creature was reported in January 2003.

FACING PAGE: 'Spooky Woods', near Stocksbridge, home to strange lights and galloping sounds.

by hoaxers. Nick Redfern explains that an article in the local press in February 2003 mentioned that two sixth formers at Gosforth High School had roamed about in a hired gorilla costume in Kielder Forest, Northumberland, in the summer of 2002; it turned out that this was in connection with an arts project at their school.² They were adamant that none of their activities had occurred at Bolam Lake, but he speculates that perhaps someone else – possibly another student at the school – had secretly hired the same costume and paraded about in it at Bolam Lake. Irrespective of whether some of the earlier sightings had been hoaxed, Redfern suggests that what the CFZ and TW members observed in January 2003 was a 'thought-form', born out of belief and expectation. He contends that the encounter couldn't, in any circumstances, be blamed on the antics of a student at the school, particularly given the utterly 'flat', huge and shadow-like nature of what was seen.

JUDY WOODS, NEAR BRADFORD, WEST YORKSHIRE

Between Bradford and Brighouse, there's a small complex of woodland known as Judy Woods. Paul Devereux notes that the woodland lies near a reservoir and power lines, and that it was the setting for a small UFO flap in the autumn of 1981.³ Initially, bright streaks of light, similar to lightning, were seen. Then, over a period of weeks, lights were seen flashing and hovering above the woods. Blobs of light appeared. They split into smaller pieces, which hovered and floated down. Humming sounds and odours (resembling that of rotten eggs) reportedly accompanied some of the sightings.





ABOVE: Wharncliffe Woods, just outside Sheffield, where one unhappy camper was allegedly grabbed and held upside down by a big hairy entity.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The wooded banks of the Shropshire Union Canal, where the Man Monkey is said to lurk – a case investigated by Nick Redfern in FT251.

‘SPOOKY WOODS’, NEAR STOCKSBRIDGE, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Jenny Randles relates a story, told to her by Jane Hayes (pseudonym), about an incident in 1948.⁴ Along with three others, Hayes was camping in a small wood, known locally as ‘Spooky Woods’.⁵ Hayes and her companions were in their tent when they heard what sounded like a horse galloping towards them; the noise stopped when it reached the tent. When the campers went out to look, there were no hoofmarks in the soft earth. Regarding this wood, Hayes subsequently learned from local farmers that they’d often seen lights there, but found nothing when they went to investigate. It’s not clear whether these lights were seen *among* the trees, *above* them, or both. Some 10 years after she heard the ghostly galloping sounds, Hayes and her young son reportedly saw a circle of lights hovering over a reservoir behind the woods. The lights winked out, although it’s not clear how long they remained in view.

BROOMHEAD RESERVOIR, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Recently, I was contacted by Sheffield resident Robin Ellis, who reported something he’d experienced one evening in August 2003 while walking along a path on the south side of Broomhead Reservoir: “At one point, I walked into a powerful atmosphere. I looked into the [nearby] wood and saw, sitting on a fallen tree trunk

He was suspended upside down, held by a big, black, fur-covered arm

bridging a stream, a curious figure. It was about three feet [19cm] high, with pricked ears rising above its head. In the gloaming, it was impossible to make out details, just the shape. I observed it for two to three minutes from the path, [and] then tried to get closer. Instantly, it seemed to ‘pop’ out of existence...”

WHARNCLIFFE WOODS, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Researcher Paul Sinclair cites an account given to him in 2017 by Jason Jones concerning Wharncliffe Woods, about two miles east of Broomhead Reservoir.⁶ The events in question had allegedly occurred some 30 years earlier, when Jones was 18. He and two older friends, Scott and Mark, were camping out in the wood, although not in tents. They lit a fire and eventually drifted off to sleep. Jason woke at around 2am, feeling something wasn’t right. This was followed by an overwhelming sense of fear. He heard a twig snap, and very

soon after “all hell broke loose”, with trees and branches cracking and breaking everywhere. It’s not clear whether this was purely a matter of sounds being heard, or whether trees and branches really *were* breaking. Then, Jason heard Scott screaming: he was suspended, upside down, two or three feet above the ground, being held by a big, black, fur-covered arm! Suddenly, the entity let go of Scott and ran off, with the men hearing the breaking of trees and plants. As the creature seemed to get further away, there was a sound like a gunshot followed by silence.

Instead of leaving immediately, the men built up the fire and waited for daylight. They reportedly experienced a succession of further ‘attacks’, which were similar to the first, although no one was lifted into the air, and no entity was seen. Between each episode there was a quiet period of about half an hour. During the second ‘attack’, Jason inferred that *two* creatures were involved, because he could hear movement from more than one direction.

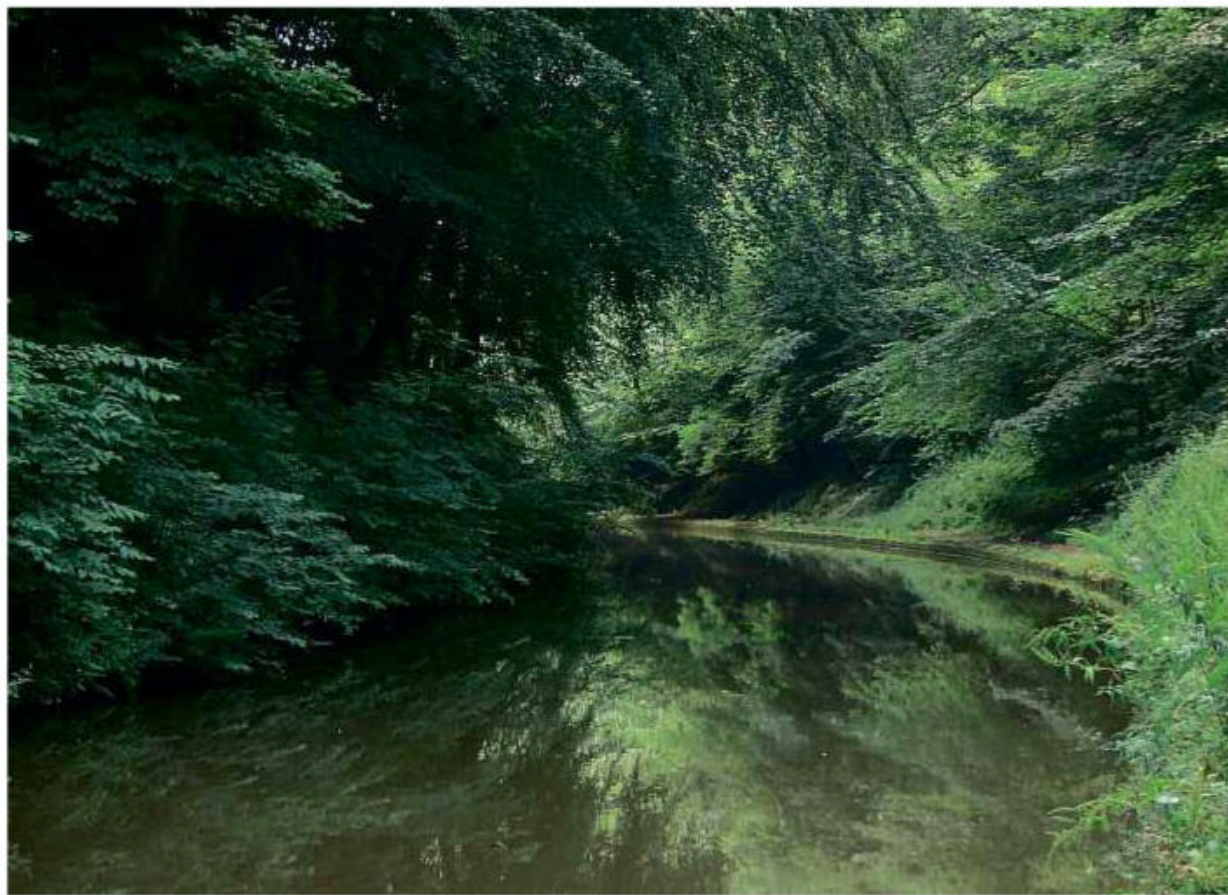
I’ve found no other reports of a similar nature concerning Wharncliffe Woods. What Jason described is reminiscent of Bigfoot activity; however, it’s hard to believe that this relatively small area of woodland next to Sheffield is home to flesh-and-blood Bigfoot-like creatures. If the story is true, could it be that the manifestations were orchestrated by a *genius loci* that regarded the lighting of a campfire as a threat to the wood or as an act of desecration?

**BUXTON COUNTRY PARK,
DERBYSHIRE**

At a conference I attended in 2018, speaker Brian Sterling-Vete referred to strange lights he'd seen in a wooded area near the spa town of Buxton many years before. He kindly sent me further information about his experiences.

The woodland in question is in Buxton Country Park. Sterling-Vete noticed the lights while making evening and late-night trips in and around the area in the late 1970s. Initially, he didn't give them much thought. Eventually, though, he asked some of the older locals about them. Their response was to warn him about becoming too curious or venturing into the area where the lights were at night. It was as if they'd become irrationally superstitious – unless, of course, they knew something that they didn't want to admit to. Some people even spoke of witchcraft and of local covens using the area for rituals after dark. Again, Sterling-Vete was cautioned to forget what he'd seen; but he wasn't disposed to take such advice.

The next time he saw the lights, he stopped his car and went to investigate them, accompanied by a friend. They walked towards the woods without lighting a torch, which would have given away their presence. The lights were among the trees, but not above them. As the men got much closer, they still couldn't clearly discern what the lights were. But curiously, they seemed to be more like an aurora. When the pair arrived at the treeline, the lights were still ahead, but they suddenly dispersed as the men walked on. The witnesses then found themselves surrounded by lights, which seemed to be under intelligent control and trying to usher them out of the area. They had a strong sense that they were being watched by hundreds of eyes. Before long, they left the woods, never to return.



**BAGOT'S WOOD, NEAR ABBOTS
BROMLEY, STAFFORDSHIRE**

Nick Redfern describes an experience that a 10-year-old boy, Alfred Tipton, allegedly had in the summer of 1937 with four friends in Bagot's Wood (sometimes spelled without an apostrophe and also known as 'Bagot's Forest' or 'Bagots Forest'; see FT336:31).⁷ It's located to the north of Abbots Bromley (home of the Horn Dance; see FT336:26-33), and is a remnant of what was once a much larger area of woodland, Needwood Forest.

After playing for several hours, Tipton and his friends were taking a break, sitting on the warm, dry grass in the sunshine. Suddenly, they heard a shrill screeching sound coming from the trees above them. Looking up, they saw a large, black creature sitting on its haunches in a particularly tall and very old tree. With its claws tightened around a branch, it was shaking it up and down. According to Tipton, it reminded him of a devil. It peered down at the five friends for a few moments and then suddenly opened up its large, shiny wings. Their span was easily 12ft (3.7m). The creature took to the air in a way that could be described as a mixture of flying and gliding, and was out of sight in some 15-20 seconds. Tipton was subsequently shown pictures, photographs and drawings of a wide variety of large-winged creatures from the present day and the past. The one that most resembled what he and his friends had seen was a pterodactyl. Redfern also discusses the case in an Internet article,⁸ but doesn't specify his source for the report (whether, for example, he was personally in touch with Tipton); and he makes no reference to any corroborating testimony from Tipton's friends.



**BRIDGE 39 ON THE SHROPSHIRE
UNION CANAL, STAFFORDSHIRE**

In *Man-Monkey* (pp3 and 15), Nick Redfern quotes a story from a 19th century source about what allegedly befell the driver of a horse and cart as he was approaching a bridge over the Birmingham and Liverpool Canal (also known as the Shropshire Union Canal) at 10pm on 21 January 1879.⁹ A strange black creature with great white eyes sprang out of a plantation by the roadside on to the horse's back. When the man tried to dislodge it with his whip, it went through the entity. The rider dropped the whip in fright, and the horse broke into a canter. At some point subsequently, the ghostly creature vanished.

Redfern identifies the site of the supposed encounter as what's known as Bridge 39, which crosses the canal about a mile to the south-west of the village of Woodseaves in Staffordshire. The road in question is the A519. The banks of the canal are heavily wooded in that area. Judging from Redfern's research, there may be some truth in the story cited

above, because he's obtained first-hand testimony from people who claim to have had strange encounters in the locality. For example, an informant called Bob Carroll related an incident that occurred in the early hours of the morning in what was probably January or February of 1972 or 1973 (pp87-8). He was working as a lorry driver at the time, and heading for a place where he was due to make a delivery. He slowed down as he approached the bridge, and was shocked to see a "hairy man" storm through the trees and disappear down toward the direction of the canal. The figure looked well built, but no more than five feet (1.5m) tall. Carroll stopped, turned on his lorry's hazard warning lights, and ran back to where he'd seen the figure. Looking over both sides of the bridge, he couldn't see anything, although he heard what sounded like a baby crying, but a lot louder. When he got back to his lorry, it seemed that the battery was flat for a minute or two, but then it 'kicked in'.

Another of Redfern's informants, Paul Bell, related having had *two* odd experiences while fishing in the canal, but Redfern doesn't specify how close Bell was to the bridge. On a Saturday afternoon in the hot summer of 1976, he saw a large, dark-coloured eel or snake-like creature in the water, moving slowly (pp92-3). Its head resembled that of a black sheep, and was flicking from side to side rapidly. Bell estimated that the creature may have been 10ft (3m) long, if not slightly longer. Although he had a Polaroid camera with him, he didn't think to take a snap of it. Therefore we'll never know whether the experience was objective or hallucinatory. The second experience occurred on the

ACCORDING TO FOLKLORE...

A number of other woodland locations in England are supposedly haunted. However, the reports tend to be little more than vague folklore, since the supposed witnesses go largely unnamed. Here are some examples.

BRADLEY WOODS, NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE

A wood near the village of Bradley is supposedly haunted by the ghost of a young woman wearing a black cloak and hood. However, the stories about her have a strong 'folklore flavour'. Without testimony from named witnesses, one might doubt whether there's much to them. ¹

WOMBWELL WOOD, NEAR BARNSELY, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

There've allegedly been many reports of ghostly manifestations in Wombwell Wood over the years, although there doesn't seem to be much testimony from named witnesses. The commonest sighting has been that of a male apparition that supposedly resembles Guy Fawkes and allegedly jumps out on walkers in the woods. An unnamed couple reported that the figure leapt out at them as they drove past the woods – and covered its face with a cape as they passed through it. Bright balls of light have been reported, and many people have supposedly been attacked in the woods by a force that made them feel so ill that they passed out. We're also told that 'shadow figures' have often been sighted in the area. A paranormal investigator called Phil Sinclair visited the locality and felt that something, claiming to be evil, was mocking him and playing around with his equipment. ²

HERMIT'S WOOD, NEAR ILKESTON, DERBYSHIRE

Located south-west of Ilkeston, there's a small area of ancient woodland known as Hermit's Wood. People have supposedly heard strange banging noises here, often accompanied by their sensing a change from a normal atmosphere



ABOVE: A scene of midnight wood-logging in Epping Forest, 1873.

to a very oppressive one. Witnesses have allegedly had an overwhelming sensation of being watched and followed. People have also reported the apparition of a monk or some other hooded form, the sightings mainly occurring at night. Legend has it that a monk, probably from a local abbey, hanged himself in the wood. ³

WYCHWOOD FOREST, OXFORDSHIRE

Wychwood Forest is a small area of broadleaf woodland to the south-west of Charlbury. Visitors to the forest have reported feelings of being watched and followed, and sometimes even touched by an unseen presence. Many people are said to have experienced a feeling of nausea, or have heard whispers, shouts and the sounds of horses in the forest. A horse-drawn cart, driven by a man and containing two weeping children, has allegedly been seen there on occasion. A tree in the forest, thought to have been used for hanging criminals, is supposedly a hot spot for paranormal activity and produces feelings of oppression and dread. ⁴ A report by Jan Williams in the July 1994 issue of *Animals & Men* refers to people seeing unusual animals in the area, including a bear or bear-like creature.

EPHING FOREST, LONDON/ ESSEX

Epping Forest straddles the boundary between north-east London and Essex. Sadly, the present-day forest is much smaller than it used to be. The area has supposedly been the setting for ghostly phenomena, but the reports tend to be of the anonymous folklore type. For example, a newspaper item, available on the Internet, refers to Loughton Camp and states that it's thought to have been used as a base by Boudicca (the Celtic warrior queen who led an uprising against the Romans in about AD 60), "and [that] this has led a number of people to think that the spirits and memories of dead soldiers have been left in the area." Again, rather vaguely, the article states that a number of accounts mention muffled sounds of drums and marching coming from the forest, which some people have attributed to the spirits of dead soldiers ⁵.

'SALLY IN THE WOOD', NEAR BATH

A stretch of the A363 road to the east of Bath is known as 'Sally in the Wood', the 'Sally' apparently being the name of a female ghost that has reputedly appeared to motorists driving on the road through this wooded area, a few miles north-west of Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire. ⁶

It's supposedly renowned for road traffic collisions, some of which have been fatal. In April 2008, a number of paranormal investigators visited the area and had some odd subjective experiences, which may have been due to suggestion and imagination rather than anything paranormal. Some of the investigators also heard odd sounds. ⁷ The website item reporting their visit includes an appended account from 'Luke from Bristol', who mentioned a three-day camping trip to the area that he and two elder brothers had made when they were in their early teens. It had been "amazing" during the daytime, but "tense and uncomfortable at night": what looked like hands pressed into the tent lining, pegs and guy lines were pulled out, and sounds of children (both laughing and crying) were heard coming from outside.

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⁴ Helen Murphy Howell, "If you go down to the woods today..." Britain's haunted forests', <https://hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/If-You-Go-Down-To-The-Woods-Today-Britains-Haunted-Forests>

⁵ Joseph Flaig, 'Epping Forest's haunted history', <https://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/localhistory/11689188.epping-forests-haunted-history/>

⁶ Judging from a Google map, the name 'Sally in the Wood' also applies to a stretch of minor road that branches north off the A363. See: <https://www.google.com/maps/@51.375597,-2.2901975,15z>

⁷ Maria Williams, 'Sally in the Woods', <http://www.twilightshadowsparanormal.co.uk/sallyinthewoods.html>



PETER MCCUE

ABOVE: Dering Wood, Pluckley, has a probably undeserved reputation for being haunted. BELOW: The 'ghostly figure' snapped by Lola Swan in Leigh Woods.

following Saturday (p95). Bell was fishing at virtually the same spot when he sensed that he was being watched. Looking across the canal, he was horrified to see a dark, hairy face staring at him from thick bushes. It had both human and monkey-like features. But the sighting was very brief, with the creature running into the trees and out of sight. In terms of size, it resembled a large monkey.

Reported sightings of this type haven't been confined to the immediate vicinity of the bridge. For example, a man referred to as Simon informed Redfern about an experience that he'd had in the summer of 1982 while walking beside the canal with a girlfriend (pp57-9). They were about three quarters of a mile from the bridge. He saw dozens of birds noisily flying away, and heard a sudden, loud screaming noise from the other side of the canal. Then, he saw a large, muscular and agile creature get up and leave. He estimated that its height was, at most, five and a half feet (1.7m). It looked like a gorilla face-on, but when it turned sideways, Simon noticed that it had a very long muzzle, like a werewolf. His girlfriend was apparently traumatised by the incident. (See Nick Redfern, 'In Search of the Man Monkey', **FT251:36-40**).

LEIGH WOODS, BRISTOL

Press reports in 2014 related a story about two women who'd abandoned a camping trip after having some disturbing experiences in Leigh Woods, near the Clifton Suspension Bridge on the western outskirts of Bristol. According to the *Daily Mail*, the campers were 34-year-old Kate



Channon and 28-year-old Lola Swan ¹⁰ (the *Huffington Post* gave Channon's age as 24). ¹¹

The women erected their tent during daylight, and their hammer went missing. As night fell, they began to hear strange noises, and they felt as if they were being watched. At one point, Channon whistled and something whistled back. The 'final straw' came at 1am, when they heard a child's voice. Feeling panicky, they packed up their tent and left. The next day, Swan flicked through some photographs taken the previous night. She noticed an image of what she assumed to have been a ghostly figure watching them. However, to me, it's amorphous, and it seems speculative to attribute it to something paranormal. Similarly, it's unclear whether the noises that the women heard were of a paranormal origin. It's conceivable

that they were caused by animals, or by other people (possibly pranksters) who happened to be in the wood that night.

DERING WOOD, PLUCKLEY, KENT

Multiple ghostly happenings have supposedly occurred in and around the village of Pluckley, near Ashford in Kent (see **FT87:53, 308:70, 386:35**). Whether the area has seen more than its fair share of truly paranormal events might be questioned [and will be, in a future issue of *FT – Ed*]. However, in the mid-1990s, in an episode of the television series *Strange but True?* several witnesses testified to having had ghostly experiences there. ¹² For example, Peggy Theobald reported an occasion when she and her husband had seen a coach and horses, which then disappeared.

One of the supposedly haunted locations in the Pluckley area is Dering Wood, colloquially known as 'Screaming Woods'. It's about a mile and a half west-south-west of Pluckley, and most of it is now owned by the Woodland Trust, which manages it for conservation, small-scale timber production, and public access. The main entrance is on the north side of the wood, at the Woodland Trust's car park beside the minor road between Pluckley and Smarden. I visited the wood on a sunny day in October 2018 and found it to be a pleasant spot, and not at all creepy. Sadly, though, it seems that the wood's reputation for being haunted may have attracted sensation-seekers with a lack of respect for the environment. ¹³

In a slim book lacking references,

a bibliography or an index, Zachery Knowles includes a short chapter on Dering Wood.¹⁴ He mentions a few ghosts that are said to haunt it, but names no witnesses and doesn't give any specific dates for supposed sightings. For example, he refers to an unnamed young man who, at an unspecified date, was walking in the wood and allegedly encountered an apparition of a man hanging from a tree, the figure supposedly being that of a colonel who'd committed suicide in the 18th century. Knowles states that the bodies of 20 people, 11 of them children, were found in the wood in 1948, and that the corpses displayed no sign of injury or cause of death. He refers to this as the "Dering Woods Massacre", and he adds that local residents had seen lights coming from "the forest" the night before. (In terms of its size, Dering Wood is hardly a forest.) Knowles claims that 50 years to the day after the 'massacre', locals spotted a strange light, shaped like a cobweb, hanging over the woodland for a lengthy period, and that four students disappeared in the wood that night, never to be seen again.

Mention of the purported 'massacre' can be found on *YouTube*. For example, it's referred to in a video about England's 'most haunted' forests and woods. The video shows what's supposedly a report about it on the front page of a local newspaper, which is dated 2 November 1948.¹⁵ The alleged newspaper article and the story about the 'massacre' are clearly fabrications, and there are some fairly obvious give-aways. The price of the paper is shown as '1p', but decimalisation of the UK's currency didn't occur until 1971. In 1948, there were 240 pence to the

pound, and one penny would have been shown then as '1d', not '1p'. The supposed newspaper cover includes a postcode, but they didn't exist in 1948. In the article, there's a photograph of bodies piled on the ground. The picture appears to have been taken in 1945, in Lithuania, not in Dering Wood.¹⁶ I've little doubt that the story about the missing students is also completely bogus, but I don't know whether Zachery Knowles and the makers of the video really believe these tall tales, which focus on the Hallowe'en period.

ST LEONARD'S FOREST, NEAR HORSHAM, WEST SUSSEX

In 2008, 18-year-old Stephen Foster and 16-year-old Todd Bevis claimed to have had some ghostly experiences while camping overnight near the church of St John the Evangelist at Coolhurst, on the western fringe of St Leonard's Forest. Furthermore, Foster reported a disturbing aftermath. The case received press attention at the time (see FT247:21)¹⁷ and eventually featured in an episode of a television series called *True Horror*. Under the title 'Terror in the Woods', the episode was aired on Channel 4 in early May 2018.¹⁸ I don't know whether Foster and Bevis's story was a publicity-seeking invention, but in the television episode, screened years after the supposed events, they were still claiming that it was true. They enjoyed making comedy videos and wanted to do some *Blair Witch*-style filming at a local 'spooky' location. Their alleged experiences during their night in the woods included hearing the screams of a young girl and feeling a strange presence trying to enter their tent. Foster claimed to believe that an evil force had followed

him home, because doors had opened and closed by themselves and he'd seen dark shapes flitting about his bedroom. After one particularly terrifying night two weeks after the camping trip, he reportedly refused to enter his bedroom, and took to sleeping on the sofa downstairs. His mother, Caroline, backed up his tale. Over time, the phenomena abated.

CLAPHAM WOOD, NEAR WORTHING, WEST SUSSEX

To the north-west of the coastal town of Worthing, is the village of Clapham. It's adjacent to an area of woodland known as Clapham Wood (see FT201:76-77). A 1987 book called *The Demonic Connection* referred to multiple odd happenings in the area, such as UFO sightings and dogs going missing.¹⁹ The book suggested that a sinister black magic group had been using the wood for rituals, and it implied that this group was responsible for the deaths of five people (four named, one unnamed), whose bodies were found in the area between 1972 and 1981, although only one of them was found in Clapham Wood itself. I've presented a detailed examination of the Clapham Wood case in Chapter 6 of my book *Zones of Strangeness: An Examination of Paranormal and UFO Hot Spots* (AuthorHouse, 2012), where I point out that there may be mundane, non-paranormal, explanations for much of what's been reported. For example, a gamekeeper with a hostile attitude to visiting canines could have been responsible for the dog disappearances. As for the aforementioned human deaths, *The Demonic Connection* doesn't cite any convincing evidence linking them with the activities of an occult group.



ABOVE: The disturbing experiences reported by a pair of teenage campers in St Leonard's Forest became the basis for an episode of C4's *True Horror*.



ABOVE: A pentagram carved into a tree stump in Clapham Wood.

THE NEW FOREST, HAMPSHIRE

The 10 November 1969 issue of the *Daily Mirror* carried a story about a family who'd reportedly seen a strange sight near Beaulieu Abbey in the New Forest, 17 years previously.

John and Christine Swain and their two sons were on a minor road when they saw a mist-shrouded lake. About 50 yards from the shore was a boulder with a sword stuck in it, which they assumed was a memorial to the fabled King Arthur. However, despite making some 250 return visits over the years to try to locate the scene again, they'd been unsuccessful. The newspaper article didn't say whether the family actually stopped their car and got out to view the 'memorial', but since it apparently fascinated them, I presume they did. However, I've been unable to glean any more information about the incident, and therefore I'm not sure what to make of the report. A possible explanation is that the witnesses experienced an illusion caused by the mist. Some years ago, I was driving east on the A811 near Buchlyvie in central Scotland when I 'saw' a loch to my left, in the direction of a low-lying area known as Flanders Moss. This caused a moment of puzzlement, because I was familiar with the locality and I knew that there was no loch there. I then realised that it was an illusion produced by an extensive area of ground mist.

There have been other reports of people seeing phantom scenery. Some years ago, a correspondent informed me about a puzzling experience that she and her future husband had had in the summer of 1939. They were in the habit of going for evening walks through the Camperdown Estate near Dundee. On the occasion in question, they entered a clearing in a wooded area and saw a summerhouse

made of logs with a paved path leading up to it. The next evening, they went the same way, but to their dismay, they couldn't find the summerhouse, and numerous subsequent searches also drew a blank. Perhaps their experience was a shared hallucination. Or maybe their memories were edited by some mysterious process, leaving them with a compelling, but false, recollection of having seen the summerhouse. If so, did the hallucination or false memory represent a scene that actually existed at some point in the past? We'll doubtless never know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Dave Pickersgill, for providing photographs of 'Spooky Wood' and Wharncliffe Wood, and David T Muir, for proofreading this article.

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This article was extracted and adapted from *Britain's Paranormal Forests: Encounters in the Woods* by Peter A McCue, published by The History Press, £12.99.

♦ PETER A McCUE is a former clinical psychologist with an active interest in psychical research and ufology and has contributed a number of articles to FT. His other books are *Zones of Strangeness* (2012) and *Paranormal Encounters on Britain's Roads* (2018).

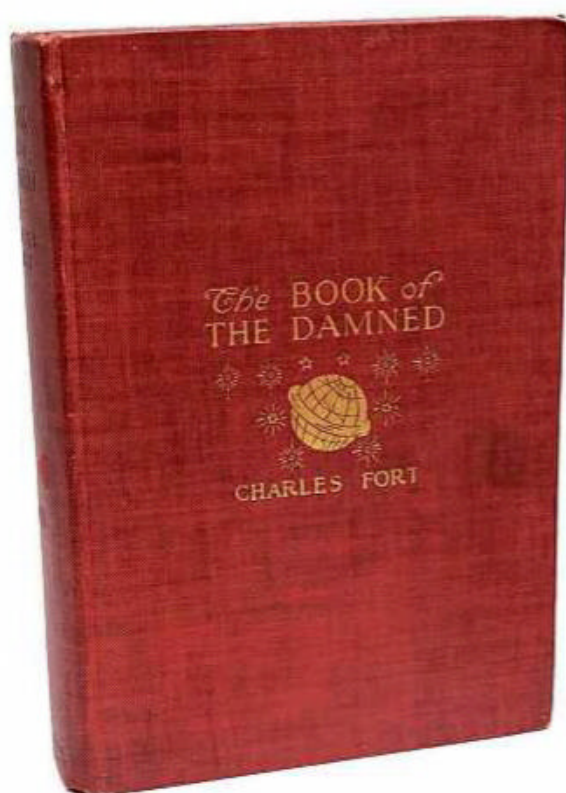
FROM DOMINANTS TO THE DAMNED FORT AND PHILOSOPHY

IAN JAMES KIDD marks the centenary of *The Book of the Damned* by examining it in the context of the philosophical background of its time. What emerges is not Fort the ‘foe of science’ but a modern, metaphysical thinker who embraced a world of constant flux.

Charles Fort’s *The Book of the Damned* was published a century ago. It was widely reviewed in newspapers and scientific journals throughout late 1919 and early 1920, with most critics finding the style irritating, the ideas intriguing, and the purpose obscure. Interestingly, the science journals were kinder. *Popular Astronomy* found it a “strange book”, if “very readable and suggestive”. Newspapers were meaner, the *New York Times* scorning its “jerky, Rabelasian” style and dismissing it as “a quagmire of pseudo-science and queer speculation”.¹ Fortunately, some reviewers offered happier verdicts. A review in the *Chicago Daily News*, by the screenwriter Ben Hecht, gave us the term ‘fortean’. Captivated by the book’s imagination and originality, Hecht declared indifference as to Fort’s purposes and sincerity: “Mountebank or Messiah, it matters not.”²

Attempts were made to interest leading men of letters and public intellectuals. The results were mixed. HG Wells famously dismissed Fort as a “damnable bore”, offended by his talk of “orthodox science”. “Science is a continuing exploration,” wrote Wells. “How the devil can it have an orthodoxy?”³ Others were less certain in their judgements, and confessed their perplexity. In the New York Public Library, librarian Edmund Pearson found it “readable” with “evidence of great industry, and some indication of scholarship”, such that it didn’t seem “the work of a crank”.⁴ Still, the impressionistic prose, torrents of odd data, and speculative dithyrambs still led to its classification as ‘Eccentric Literature’, provoking an angry public letter from Fort.⁵

Such varying remarks point to three main readings of *The Book of the Damned*. First, it’s an industrious piece of crankery, maybe even an elaborate practical joke; second, an intemperate polemic against science; third, a vivid celebration of independence



Wells famously dismissed Fort as a “damnable bore”

of mind and critical defiance of dogmatism. An additional interpretation lurks on the margins: *Book of the Damned* as a serious contribution to philosophy.

Granted, there’s a loose sense of ‘philosophical’, to mean critical and openminded, earnestly challenging received wisdom and complacent certainties, and all that. But I mean philosophy in the more technical sense of consciously participating in a wider tradition of serious, systematic reflection on reality and the place of human beings within (or perhaps without) it. The ‘philosopher’ reading was confined to those

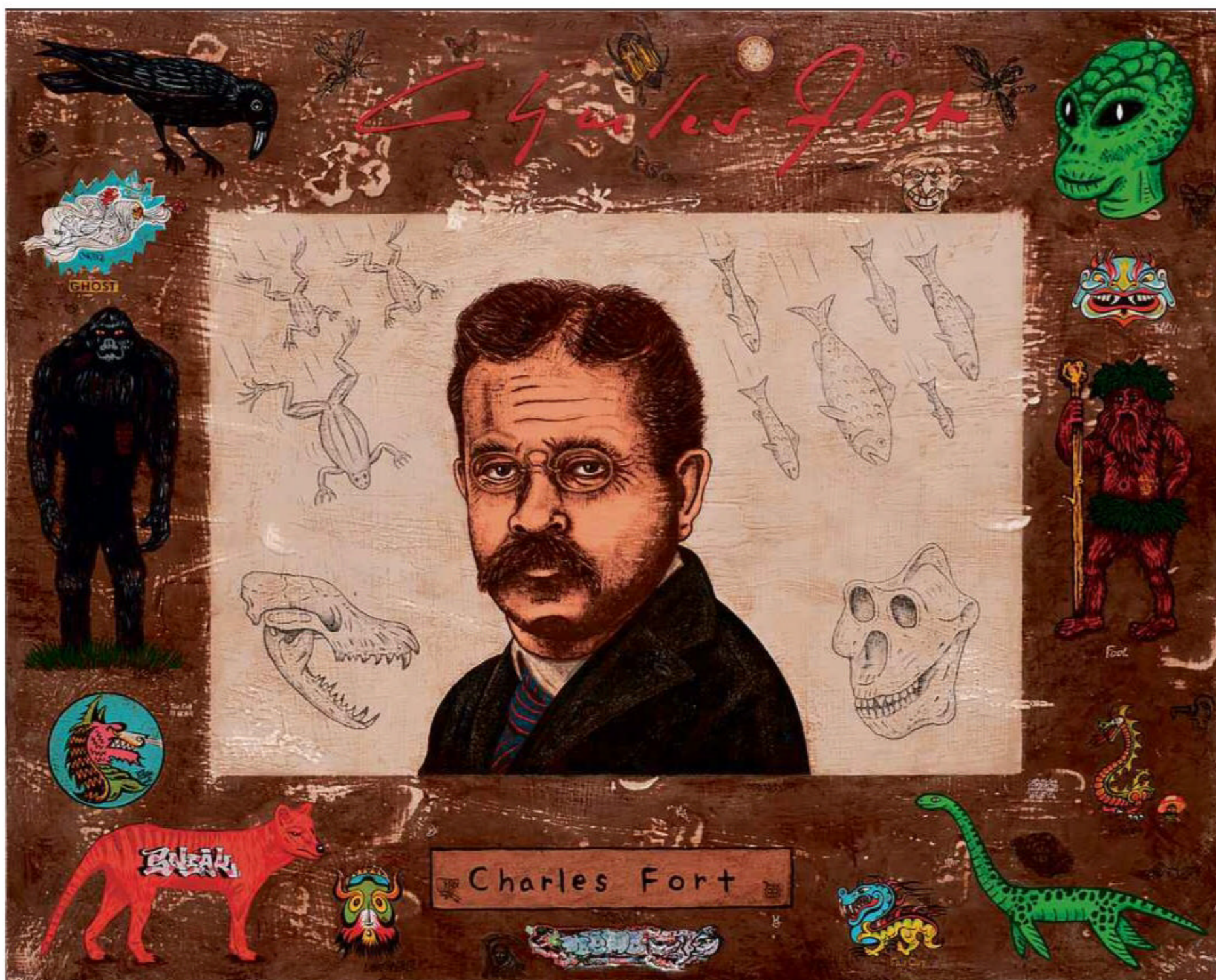
LEFT: The first edition of *The Book of the Damned*, which *Popular Astronomy* found a “strange book”.

of Fort’s contemporaries who were also, tellingly, his close friends: the novelist Theodore Dreiser (who famously got the book published) and the writer Benjamin DeCasseres. Some later fortuneans have echoed this view, pre-eminently *FT* founder Bob Rickard and the late John Michell. Otherwise, though, there is little sense that Fort belongs to the history of philosophy. After all, doesn’t he urge us to “substitute acceptance for belief”, something surely incompatible with philosophical system-mongering and confident discoursing on life, the Universe, and everything?

Well, no, since belief-mongering and system-building are only *some* of the ways of doing philosophy. Fort’s hostility to dogmatism was, anyway, clearly motivated by certain philosophical convictions – polemics usually have their purposes. Consider the opening lines of *Book of the Damned*: “we shall have a procession of data that Science has excluded” – indeed, that science has “falsely excluded.”⁶ Confronted with remarks like this, appeals to Fort’s temperamental anti-authoritarianism seem too psychologistic. We can search for deeper motivations for a critique of Dogmatic Science. Considered in the light of *fin-de-siècle* styles of philosophy, such concerns fall quickly into place. To see this, let’s start with one of the most influential ‘pro-science’ 19th century philosophical movements – positivism.

POSITIVISM AND DOGMATISM

For all his originality and independence of mind, Fort was philosophically a man of his time. It was natural for him to engage with positivism, founded by Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who urged a double confidence in science: as the privileged source of knowledge and our best hope for moral and social progress. Comte’s aspiration was to organise all the sciences on a scale from the



JEFFREY VALLANCE

ABOVE: Charles Fort, as imagined by artist and FT regular Jeffrey Vallance.

general to the particular, governed by the science he founded: sociology. In this vision, the disciplines develop in an historical dynamic, each one preparing the way for another (physics presuppose maths, biology presupposes chemistry, and so on; and some sciences tend to ‘absorb’ one another).

The result is a stirring vision of science as a rational, progressive enterprise, captured in Comte’s famous ‘Doctrine of the Three Stages’. In the initial ‘theological’ stage, events are explained in terms of supernatural personal beings (gods, spirits), which are then succeeded in the ‘metaphysical’ stage by abstract entities (atoms, forces). The final ‘positive’ stage then dispenses with dogmatic commitment to entities altogether, focusing on abstract laws that skilled technocrats can manipulate to advance the human good.

Fort actually started out with a paradigmatically positivist project: comparing diverse phenomena in order to identify underlying laws that could be levered for human purposes:

“I had a theory. Because of the theory, I took hundreds of notes a day.

The theory:

That all things are one; that all phenomena are governed by the same laws; that whatever is true, or what we call true, of planets, plants, and magnets, is what we call true of human beings;

That if, among such widely dissimilar phenomena as the moon, the alimentary canal of an ant eater, and glacial erosions, we can discover uniformities, there we have the associations of events commonly called laws, which may equally be in control of human affairs —

Oh, yes, I know all about the antiquity of this philosophy; back to Comte anyway.”⁷

Obviously, this positivist phase was abandoned, as Fort recalled in a 1929 memoir describing his shift from story writer to an ‘immature metaphysician, psychologist, sociologist’:

“In the years 1912-1913, the met. [metaphysician] was almost all in me. Then came the BOOK OF THE DAMNED. It expressed me as a met., but the data of it started a new self or the interests that compose a self that then expressed in NEW LANDS.”⁸

What Fort abandoned was the vision of reality presupposed by positivism – that there are strict, delineable differences between discrete things, which are apt for tidy categorisation. Positivism posits strict differences – the chemical and the biological, the theological and the metaphysical – such that “the spirit of abrupt difference”, said Fort, “is the spirit of positivism”.

The Book of the Damned decisively rejects this tidy vision of reality. Its startling opening chapters present a very different vision: of reality as a single “inter-continuous nexus”, of “quasi-things” that “merge away” into one another, existing in a state of ghostly “intermediatism”. Within this rather Buddhist vision of a fluid world of process and change, no sense can be made of positivist aspirations to define and classify, activities that require, impossibly, the “breaking of Continuity”. Fort therefore rejected positivism as the doctrinal expression of a “universal attempt to formulate or to regularise – an attempt that can only be made by disregarding or denying”, attempting to “draw a positive



LEFT: Auguste Comte (1798-1857), French philosopher, father of Positivism and champion of science as a rational, progressive enterprise. **BELOW:** The American writer Benjamin DeCasseres (1873-1945), one of the few of Fort's contemporaries who viewed his work as being essentially philosophical.

line between the objective and the subjective.” If all things are merging and inter-continuous, there are no positive differences, only a “seeming of distinctness, the seeming of individuality”.

Already, we see that Fort had deeper grounds for his critiques of ‘Dogmatic Science’ than a mere dislike of dogmatic people prone to dismiss reports of falls of fish and frogs. A deeper metaphysical vision was at work. Tiffany Thayer – erstwhile, idiosyncratic Secretary of the Fortean Society – urged readers of *The Book of the Damned* to skip over its opening chapters, dismissing them as “jejune”. [9] But those are the most profound, since in them Fort was describing his guiding vision of a reality where “nothing can attempt to be, except by attempting to exclude something else”, of “quasi-things” striving to achieve some “positive difference” and become “more nearly real”. Those who know their history of philosophy will be quick to spot parallels: Nietzsche and Schopenhauer’s cosmologies of the will, Bergson’s *élan vital*, Spinoza’s *conatus* and, later, Whitehead’s process philosophy.

Fort’s metaphysics doesn’t just sit in the background. It explains his deep hostility to ‘Dogmatic Science’. Within an inter-continuous nexus, there is “no basis for classification”, demarcation, or

Fort’s metaphysics explains his deep hostility to dogmatic science



“damnation”, since there’s no final, positive basis for distinguishing things. “Positivism is Puritanism”, quipped Fort, each premised on a capacity to distinguish positive from negative, saints from sinners, the acceptable from the damned. But as the catalogues of data show, such tidy classifications have “never been attained; but that Science has acted, ruled, pronounced, and condemned as if it had been attained.”

Fort’s catalogues of ‘damned data’ offer challenges to these practices of damnation, upsetting sharp demarcations by presenting ‘intermediate forms’ and actual impossibilities. Stones do not fall from the sky, for there are no stones in the sky – so what about the stones that fall from the sky? In a sense, Fort sought what Karl Popper, a few decades later, called ‘falsifications’ – make your claims, then seek data to disconfirm them! Properly used, then, a “procession of data that Science has excluded” exposes the arbitrariness of our exclusions, and, in the process, restores our sense of the fluidity of our reality.

If so, Fort’s main objection to positivism was metaphysical: the modern scientific enterprise proceeds on the assumption that the world consists of distinct things, open to neat categorisation. But that’s not right. Look at the data, ‘damned’ and accepted, and one starts to apprehend one single, inter-continuous nexus where phenomena merge and repel then merge again, a dynamic reality of pseudo-things “striving to break away from the underlying that denies them identity of their own”. Dogmatic Science denies these deep facts about the world. This is the heart of Fort’s doctrines of Continuity and Intermediatism.

As Fort recognised, this is heady stuff. Chapter 15 opens with a wry remark: “Short chapter coming now, and it’s the worst of them all. I think it’s speculative.” So where did this metaphysical vision come from? We don’t know if Fort read Nietzsche, although he did read Bergson, Spinoza, and Hegel, those three being some of the few philosophers he ever mentioned by name. But the main metaphysical debt of *Book of the Damned* was, I think, to one of the most influential philosophers of the 19th century – Herbert Spencer.

INTERMEDIATISM

Spencer was a giant of Victorian intellectual life, a leading Social Darwinist who coined the term “survival of the fittest”. Any educated person of the late 19th century knew his work, even though his reputation dimmed after 1900. Dreiser, for instance,



HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), a giant of Victorian intellectual life and a major influence on *The Book of the Damned*.

read Spencer's *First Principles* and reported that it "nearly killed me, took every shred of belief away from me".¹⁰ What was the nature of its power?

Spencer's 'Synthetic philosophy' aspired to a "statement of the ultimate principles discernible throughout all manifestations of the Absolute", that being the sum totality of existence. Crucially, existence was a vast evolutionary process, which played out across the inorganic, organic, and 'super-organic' or social realms – and readers of *Book of the Damned* will grasp where Fort acquired the terminology of 'Super-Sargasso Seas'. The whole of existence is subject to a "law of evolution and dissolution", whose ceaseless play is driving a movement from "confused simplicity" to "distinct complexity". The end state of all this cosmic drama is maximum heterogeneity, order, stability.¹¹ By surveying the 'principles' at work across diverse areas, a holistic vision of our evolving cosmos comes into view.

Fort's own metaphysical vision, sketched in the opening chapters of *The Book of the Damned*, was clearly indebted to Spencer: "the state that is commonly and absurdly called 'existence' is a flow, or a current, or an attempt, from negativeness and positiveness, and is intermediate to both."

Positiveness, for Fort, represents harmony, equilibrium, order – that state of "distinct complexity", maximally complete and inclusive. Moreover, as for Spencer, such striving characterises all phenomena, from amoebas up to squabbling imperial powers. Our existence is a dynamic tension between synthesis and dissolution, order and disorder, positiveness and negativeness.

In a flash of scholarly dialectic, Fort criticises Spencer directly, complaining that he "never recognised that 'homogeneity', 'integration', and 'definiteness' are all words for the same state" – 'positiveness'. Fort also complained that Spencer thought that positiveness, as heterogeneity, was destined to win out, contradicting his own vision of reality as a constant, pulsing rhythm between positiveness and negativeness, "the rhythm of all quasi-things" in a state of Intermediatism. The movement from confusion to distinctness ebbs and flows back and forth, since something could only become distinct by breaking free from all other things – something impossible within an inter-continous nexus.

Fort laughed at the cosmic absurdity: "our whole existence is animation of the local by an ideal that is realisable only in the universal." Only the whole could

be final and distinct, yet all quasi-things strive anyway. Some things approximate more highly to positiveness, for a time at least, only to inevitably collapse back into negativeness – empires rise and fall, the damned become orthodox, then back again.

Fort then throws out a striking line, explaining that *The Book of the Damned* explores the idea of "modern science as a manifestation of his one ideal or purpose or process". What this suggests is that his critique of Dogmatic Science, Exclusionism, and 'damnation' are all rooted in his metaphysics, rather than merely in the psychology and sociology of science. To see how, we need to look more closely at his philosophy of science.

DOMINANTS

In the later chapters of *The Book of the Damned*, Fort introduces the term 'Dominants'. "All phenomena are 'explained' in the terms of the Dominant of their era", which structures the acceptable ways of thinking. Evidence and interpretations must 'correlate' with the current Dominant, argues Fort, to the point that one can think of history in terms of "serial reactions to successive Dominants". The problem is, not all data are "plastic",



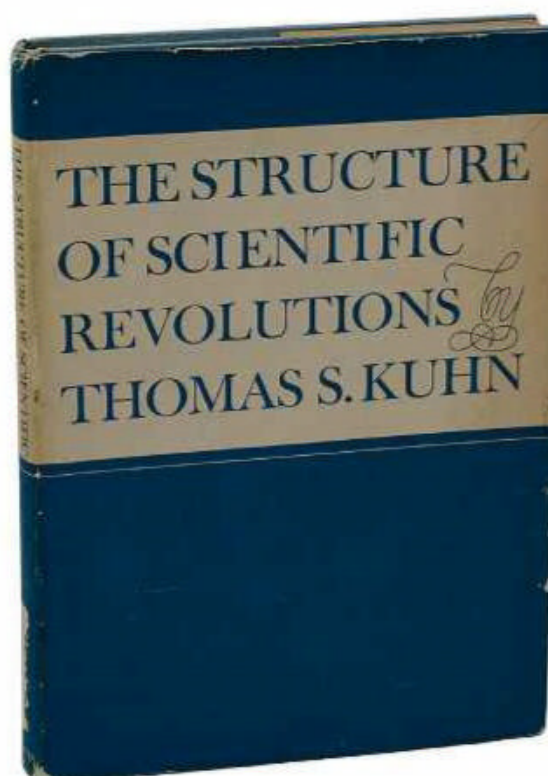
ABOVE: The American philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996). **BELOW:** Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced the concepts of scientific 'paradigms', the unquestioned structures of thought that govern scientific research at any given moment in history, and of 'paradigm shifts'.

some "will not assimilate" or tolerate their "disregard" – there are, of course, the 'damned data'.

For those who know their philosophy of science, the obvious parallel here is Thomas Kuhn's famous concept of 'paradigms'. Introduced in his 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a paradigm is a taken-for-granted structure for scientific research – prescribed problems and established methods for exploring them. Scientists are and must be dogmatic, argued Kuhn, excluding salient possibilities or alternative theories for the sake of creating a unified research community. Over time, however, anomalies inevitably build up that cannot be explained away, forcing the radical events Kuhn famously called "scientific revolutions". A new paradigm is born, enquiry is rebooted, and the cycle starts all over again.

Although philosophers of science challenged Kuhn's suspiciously tidy, mechanical account of science, the parallels with Fort are striking. Surely, 'Dominants' are 'paradigms', both dogmatically held, both collapsing in a 'revolution' precipitated by anomalies. Later on, *New Lands* even speaks of "revolutions in science", and, like Kuhn, warns that dogmatism in science is sustained by the textbooks and journal system. Granted, Fort's anomalies tend to be more exotic – rains of frogs and so on – but,

Scientists must be dogmatic to create a unified research community



setting that aside, don't we have a startling precursor to Kuhn's model?

Not quite. Reading Fort as a proto-Kuhn doesn't do justice to the depth and details of what's set out in *The Book of the Damned*. For one thing, Dominants are much broader in their scope than scientific paradigms, shaping history and culture. Earlier in history, a "Spiritual Dominant [and] up spring monasteries," then "a Materialist Dominant and up spring laboratories." This is more akin to a worldview, or Hegel's *Zeitgeist*. The real difference, though, is that Kuhn's model of science was rooted in a study of the history of science, while Fort's was applying his metaphysical vision. A clue is a remark buried in chapter one, which explains the book's guiding interest in modern science as "manifestation" of the cosmic "process" of "striving for positiveness".

"Dominants, in their succession, displace preceding Dominants," says Fort, "because they are more nearly positive, but because the old Dominants, as recruiting mediums, play out." *Positiveness* is defined in chapter one to include harmony, equilibrium, order, stability – a whole range of positive concepts, all of which serve to make something "more nearly real". Unfortunately, 'quasi-things' can never be finally or positively real, since their interrelations with other quasi-things

continually compromise their attempts to become independent and orderly. Within Fort's 'inter-continuous nexus', phenomena are not only constantly merging, but conflicting and striving to either include or exclude other things. Only the whole can be real, final, complete, since there's nothing outside of it to disturb or disrupt its harmony and equilibrium. Fort was perhaps inspired by his moody British contemporary, FH Bradley, who argued that reality-as-a-whole, "the Absolute", was "a single harmonious and systematic whole". Nothing except that whole enjoyed the independence and completeness necessary to count as *real*.¹²

Although only reality-as-a-whole – Fort's 'inter-continuous nexus' – could achieve positiveness, all things strive for it – a dynamism echoing the vitalist, organic visions of Bergson and Nietzsche. Such striving has two aspects – 'inclusions' and 'exclusions' – as when larger states absorb smaller ones, or macrophages gulp down bacteria. Whatever is recalcitrant or resistant is therefore damned, at least for a while, hence Fort's portentous remark that "by the damned, I mean the excluded. But by the excluded I mean that which will one day be the excluding." In a sense, the vision is agonistic, even absurd. Everything in our 'quasi-existence' is caught in a ceaseless striving between positiveness and negativeness – "attempted completenesses" – prompting Fort to remark on the "amazing paradox" that "all things are trying to become universal by excluding other things."

Since, for Fort, this dynamism characterises everything in existence, from the chemical to the sociological, it characterises science, too. After all, it is a "manifestation" of this process, "a pseudo-construction, or a quasi-organisation... an attempt to break away and locally establish harmony, stability, equilibrium". Dominants are striving for positiveness and so try to include data that amplify their coherence and stability and exclude and 'damn' whatever threatens to disturb their 'attempted completeness.' Put this way, Fort's analysis of Dogmatic Science – of 'Dominants' and 'Exclusionism' – isn't a Kuhn-style thesis about the psychology of scientists and the sociology of science. Sure, that's there, too, but the driving force is that dynamic, turbulent metaphysical vision. The same process that animates all of existence is there at work in science, too: the striving for positiveness, ultimately defeated by the continuities and inter-relatedness of all things that renders impossible definiteness and distinctness.

FORT THE PHILOSOPHER

No serious reader could think that Fort was the 'foe of science', a polemicist using falls of frogs to cock a snook at the sciences. But nor was he simply a foe of dogmatism and friend to all manner of

gadflies and the damned. Underlying that was a sophisticated critique of what Fort calls "provincial positivism", whose vision of an orderly reality was contradicted by "accursed tatterdemalions", damned data, "twitching, tottering... arm in arm with the spirit of anarchy." Attractive as the well-ordered, nailed down world dreamed of by Comte may be, a look at the data shows a very different reality, "a rhythm of heaven and hells [where] the damned won't stay damned [and] salvation only precedes perdition".

Conversion to this vision needn't entail abandonment of science. While the young Charles was in school, William James and Nietzsche had argued that we human beings must impose order on the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of phenomena that would otherwise tend to overwhelm us. Science, for Nietzsche, imposes order, rather than discovers it, which was the great delusion of positivism. True to this *fin-de-siècle* philosophical spirit, Fort wanted a new conception of the nature of science. Abandon the comforting dreams of a tidy world pushed by 'provincial positivism' and embrace the mercurial vision of a turbulent world of ever-changing flux – Bergson's rushing 'great river of life', perhaps, or Nietzsche's agonistic world of will to power.

A century after the debut of *The Book of the Damned*, it's high time to take seriously the philosophical context of Fort's project. Lazy talk of the 'foe of science' disguises his deep engagement with Comte, Spencer, and other stars of *fin-de-siècle* European philosophy. He was also prescient. Throughout the 20th century, philosophers rejected positivist conceptions of science as disinterested enquiry into a reality made up of discrete entities governed by stable laws. Philosophers of science now talk of 'flow', 'process', and 'emergence' – a vision of reality closer to that offered by Fort, who might see this as yet another proof of the perpetual dialectic of Dominants. After all, the damned don't stay damned.

The Book of the Damned looks very different when read in the context of the history of philosophy. Thayer dismissed its opening chapter as "jejune" and "not-very-profound". The truth is that they are the *most* profound, a fact missed by Fort's contemporaries. They were jobbing literary people – writers, editors, novelists – without academic contacts or training. The exceptions were Dreiser and DeCasseres, autodidacts of philosophical bent, who rightly grasped the depth of thinking of their reclusive friend.¹³ Within academia, few philosophers seem to know Fort, although there's interest from historians of science and literature.¹⁴ The style of thinking exemplified in *The Book of the Damned* is anyway attractive: tentative not defensive, disposed to revise certainties rather than resist criticisms, tolerant of ambiguity and constantly sensitive to overlooked possibilities.¹⁵ It's quite modern,

or even 'postmodern'.

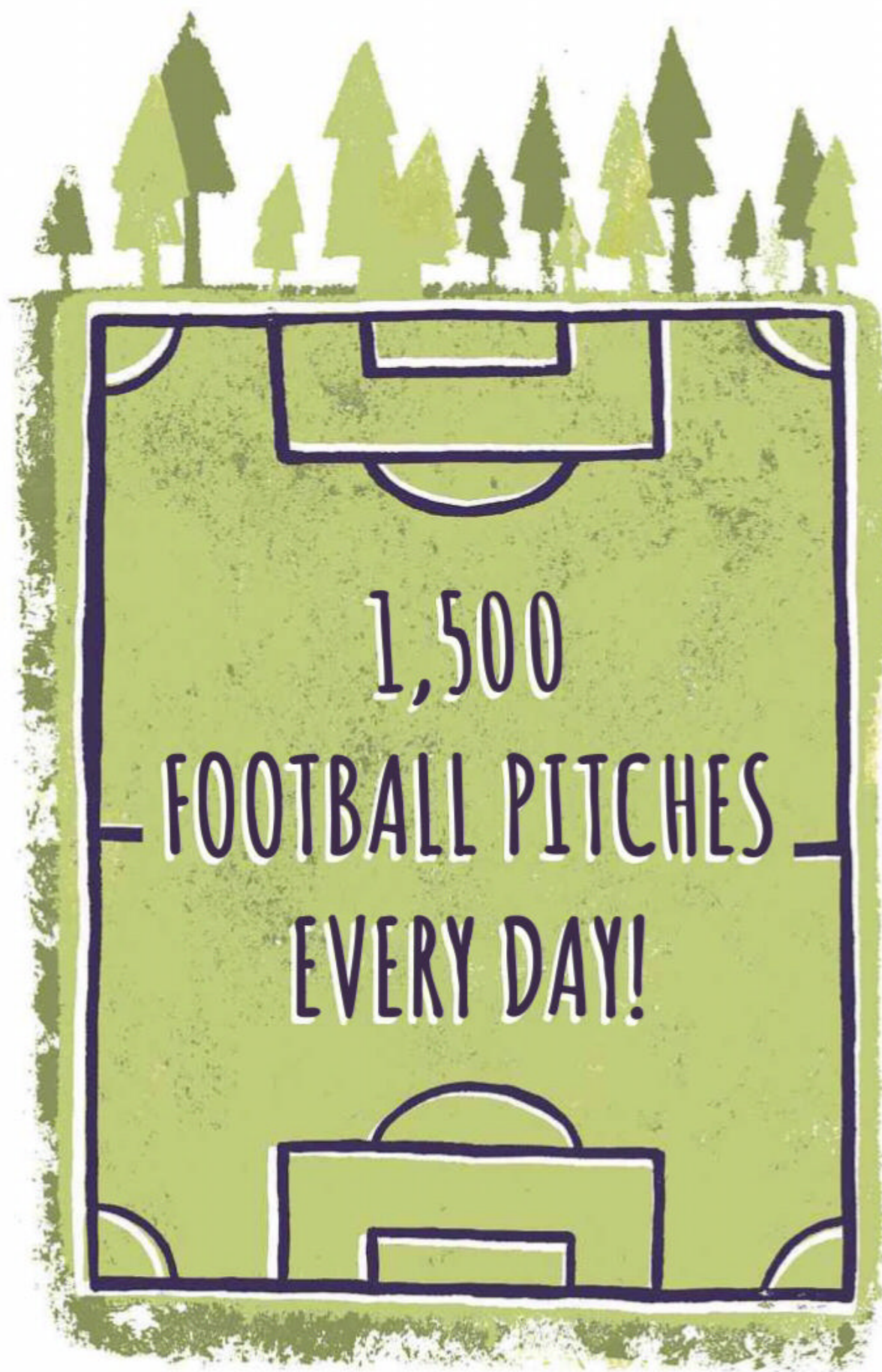
Some will baulk at such philosophical pigeonholing, preferring romanticised images of the 'hermit of the Bronx'. Did Fort not write, a decade later in *Lo!*, that he had shut himself away "from the rocks and wisdoms of ages", abandoning Christ and Einstein for "little frogs and periwinkles"? That was forgivable hyperbole. He shut himself in only after spending all those years studying Comte, Spencer, and the rest. Philosophically, then, Fort was a man of his time – and maybe even a little ahead of it. After a century, then, it's surely time to take a new look at *The Book of the Damned*.

My thanks to Bob Rickard, Mr X (his legal name), and staff at the New York Public Library and University of Pennsylvania and the University of Virginia Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

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◆ IAN JAMES KIDD is lecturer in philosophy at the University of Nottingham and has a longstanding interest in Fort's life and work. He has contributed a number of previous articles to *Fortean Times*. His website is www.ianjameskidd.weebly.com



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The Drewstown mystery

RICHARD FREEMAN wades into the murky waters of the giant eel debate with some intriguing cases from Ireland

With the recent discovery of extensive eel DNA in Loch Ness, there has been talk of the possibility that the famous monster is not some plesiosaur-like prehistoric survival but a giant eel (see **FT385:25**). Well, there are certainly some cryptozoological precedents for such an identification.

From the many loughs of Ireland come reports of serpentine monsters known locally as 'horse eels' or *peistes*. They are said to resemble eels with a horse-like mane running along their backs. They range from 10 to 30ft (3 to 9m) in length and are capable of crawling across land. The most famous sighting occurred in 1954 at Lough Fadda in Connemara, County Galway, when Georgina Carberry, a librarian from Clifden, and her friends saw a 30ft-long, eel-like beast with jaws like a shark. The creature, which she described as 'wormy', terrified her so much that she had nightmares about it for years and would never return to the lough alone or at night. The earliest reports reach back to the Book of Lismore, a mediæval Irish manuscript of 1408-11, and have continued into the modern age.

The last proper investigations were carried out by Captain Lionel Leslie and author FW Holliday in the late 1960s. Captain Leslie used dynamite in an attempt to force the creatures to the surface. He reported seeing one thrashing about in the lough after a blast had been set off.¹

The Lough Fadda monsters could be a gigantic, mutant strain of the common eel. The European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) lives in fresh water, but when it is ready



COURTESY DREWSTOWN HOUSE

Workers on the estate would never go near the two lakes

to breed it swims out into the Sargasso Sea. The eels breed and die here and the young swim back to the waters inhabited by their ancestors. However, there is a theory that some eels never develop sexually. These 'eunuch eels', as they are known, remain in fresh water and nobody knows just how long they live or how big they get. It is believed that these mutations arise on occasion within a normal population of eels. So while there is no known population of giant monster eels, there are freak individuals. In 2004, Canadian tourists reported a 25ft (7.6m) eel in the shallows of Loch Ness.

Unlike most other cryptids, two specimens of horse eel may actually have been killed and photographed. In his book *A Life on the Boyne* author Jim Reynolds recounts a story told to him by a Major McVeigh. The Major lived

at Drewstown House, County Meath, and told Reynolds how the workers on the estate would never go near the two lakes on the Drewstown estate as they believed that they were inhabited by monsters. Once, in 1907, when he was a young officer, McVeigh was on leave from India. On returning to the estate he heard that the shepherd had poisoned some dogs that had been worrying the sheep. He had been too busy to bury them and had left the carcasses down by one of the lakes.

The next morning, two huge eels were found dead on the surface of the lake. One was 12ft (3.6m) long and 25in (64cm) around; the other was 10ft (3m) long and 19in (48cm) around. The eels had died after eating the poisoned bodies of the dead dogs. Major McVeigh photographed the monster eels, surrounded by his family and staff. The creatures were apparently draped down the pillars of the house. McVeigh showed the framed picture to Reynolds and others who had doubted his story.

Today, Drewstown House is a Christian centre² and the McVeigh family have apparently

emigrated to Australia. I contacted Drewstown House on the off chance that the photograph was still there. The gentleman I spoke to, John Bailie, had heard the story of the monster eels, but told me that the photo was no longer at the house and there was no archive that he knew of.

I am trying to trace living members of the McVeigh family, just in case one of them still has the photograph. It's a long shot, but if the elusive picture still exists it would be invaluable to science. My next line of enquiry will be local newspapers and museums.

Does anybody out there know anything about the photograph, its whereabouts, or the McVeigh family? Perhaps the picture is languishing in somebody's attic or cellar...

¹ The Centre for Fortean Zoology is currently negotiating the rights to print Leslie's unpublished book about his search for Irish lake monsters.

² See <http://drewstown.com> and Drewstown House Christian Centre on Facebook.

◆ **RICHARD FREEMAN** is a cryptozoologist, author, zoological journalist, and zoological director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology.

To the lighthouse...

RIK WORTH recalls the real-life tragedy behind the new psychological horror film *The Lighthouse*

American director Robert Eggers has already cemented his position in the forteen film firmament with his 2015 goat-based folk horror, *The Witch*. His second film, *The Lighthouse*, has safely made its way across the Atlantic and arrives on British shores later this month [see review, p64].

Eggers's second feature, ahead of his adaption of *Nosferatu* and his Rasputin biopic, stars Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe as "wickies" (lighthouse keepers to you and me). The psychological horror story has received critical acclaim, having won the International Federation of Film Critics Award at Cannes this year. But this tale of Lovecraftian madness, isolation, storms, murder and woodwork has a real-life British predecessor – the Smalls Lighthouse Tragedy.

Located some 20 miles (32km) off the most westerly point of the Welsh coast, Smalls Lighthouse stands to this day, although the structure has changed since it was first built in 1776. Its name comes from the collection of battered rocks in the Irish Sea – The Smalls – that it was built on. Its original design was a simple but sturdy structure of a lamp room and living quarters standing above the sea on nine oak legs.

So remote and difficult to reach is Smalls Lighthouse that when designer Henry Whiteside, an instrument maker from Liverpool with no previous experience in lighthouse construction, was sent out with a team to reinforce his design, they were quickly cut off from civilisation. Fearing he was trapped, he sent out a message in a bottle reading: "Immediate



ABOVE: Willem Dafoe and Robert Pattinson in Robert Eggers's film *The Lighthouse*, released in the UK later this month.

BELOW: The original Smalls Lighthouse, built in 1776, with its lamp room held aloft above the waves by nine oak pillars.

assistance to fetch us off the Smalls before the next Spring or we fear we shall all perish, our water near all gone, our fire quite gone and our house in a most melancholy manner."¹

The instrument maker's message made it to shore and a rescue was promptly mounted; but two later occupants, cooper Thomas Howell and labourer Thomas Griffith were not to be so lucky.

Griffith and Howell moved into the lighthouse in 1801, 90 years before their cinematic counterparts. The two men had been residents of Solva, where the lighthouse had been partly built before being taken out to sea. According to author Christopher P Nicholson, the pair were known to have an acrimonious and noisy relationship: "What these two loved more than anything



THE SMALLS LIGHTHOUSE IN 1837.

With the exception of Smeaton's tower at the Eddystone and that on the Bell Rock, this was the only rock Lighthouse on the coast of Great Britain in 1837. It was built on oak piles, and in stormy weather rocked like a ship. Its lantern was furnished with twenty-seven argand lamps with reflectors, giving a light of about 3,000 candle-power. It was superseded by the present granite tower in 1861.



else was to argue... they could empty bars of public houses with the force of their arguments, especially when it looked like they would come to blows over something.”²

The two hotheads were never actually seen in a physical fight, so a month trapped together in a lighthouse together didn’t seem too risky a proposition – and it would give the good folk of Solva some peace and quiet.

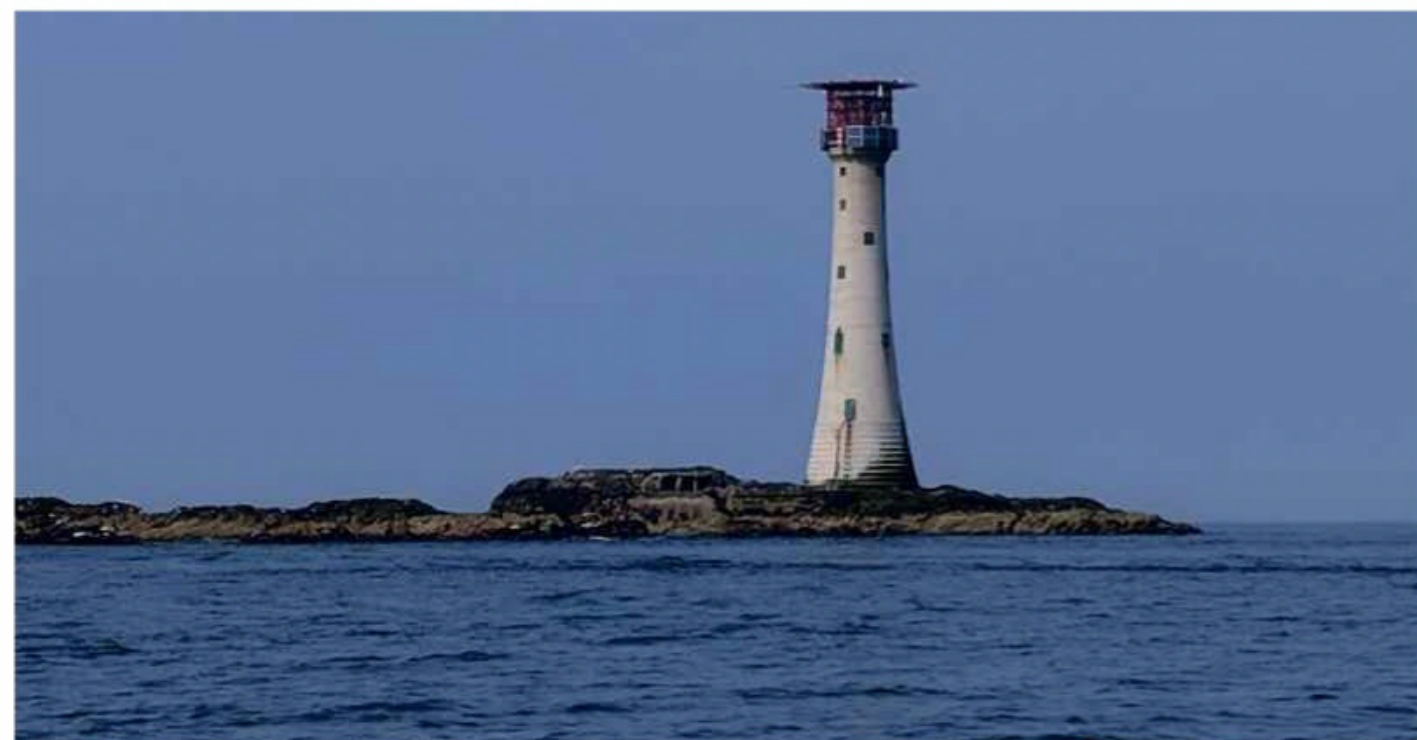
Within a couple of weeks of their arrival, a storm crashed into The Smalls and the distress signal could be seen from the shore. Though onlookers were worried, the difficult waters made relief impossible; besides, the lamp of the lighthouse was still regularly lit, giving some reassurance to the families of Griffith and Howell.

In fact, Griffith had become ill. Going about his duties in the lamp room, the usually sure-footed wickie slipped, banging his head against a rail and accidentally killing himself. This left Howell in a bit of a predicament. He was fully aware of the reputation the two men had on the mainland. If he were to commit Griffith’s body to the sea, surely he would be accused of murder?

Ivor Emlyn, in his 1858 account of The Smalls tragedy writes: “The body could not be thrown, to find its grave, into the sea; suspicion with her thousand tongues would point at Howell as the author of foul play – that to hide a lesser fault he had committed the greater one of murder!”³

So Howell kept Griffith’s body in the living quarters, raising the distress signal and continuing with his duties for as long as he could. Eventually, though, the corpse began to decompose. Unable to bear the stench, Howell crafted his roommate a coffin using his skills as a barrel maker and, in the fury of the storm, moved body and coffin upstairs to the lamp room, and then out onto the gangway at the top of the structure. Here, he lashed the coffin to the rails in order to protect it from the waves washing through the oak legs of the lighthouse.

As the storm continued, a rescue was contemplated, but the weather and treacherous,



ABOVE: The Smalls Lighthouse today. The current structure dates from 1861

rock-filled waters around the lighthouse made it impossible to for any vessel to make landfall. Several crew members of passing ships reported seeing a figure waving to them from the lighthouse, but as the lamp was lit each night, no one could quite figure out what had happened.

The coffin remained on the outside of the lighthouse for three weeks, but the constant pummelling of the Irish Sea fractured the casket, exposing Griffith’s cadaver to the wind. As Howell tried to continue with his duties, the rotting arms of Griffith scraped across the windows of the living quarters, seemingly taunting Howell and beckoning him to his own demise. This continued for three more weeks: Howell trapped by the storm, with help unable to reach him, while the corpse of his former colleague scratched at the window and threatened his sanity.

A boat from Milford carrying two lighthouse keepers arrived once the storm had finally subsided. By that time, Howell had been in the lighthouse for four months. The majority of that time he had been alone with no one but the decomposing Griffith for company. The event left him broken. Emlyn wrote: “Howell’s attenuated form demonstrated the sufferings, both mental and physical, he had undergone; his friends, in some instances, failed to recognise him on his

return home. Four months in such a place, and under such circumstances, what would it not affect?”

Once Howell told his story, it became apparent that the ‘waving’ figure reported by sailors had been Griffith, his body lashed to the frame of the lighthouse as his arm blew in the wind.

Whiteside, disturbed by the story, saw to it that from then on Smalls Lighthouse would be manned by no less than three men, so no lighthouse keeper would ever have to undergo such trauma again. This rule would become maritime law up until the mass automation of lighthouses.

Smalls Lighthouse was continually rebuilt and is famous not just for this tale, but also for being the first lighthouse with a flushing toilet. The incident has provided storytellers with no end of inspiration, prompting them to asking if there was something more sinister at play in the lonely lighthouse or exploring how the human mind can cope with such terrible strain. Welsh playwright Alan Harris developed a radio play of the incident for the BBC and in 2016 a Welsh independent movie, also called *The Lighthouse*, was nominated for four Welsh Baftas for its faithful adaptation of the story.

British lighthouses must hold some dread fascination for filmmakers, as another creepy tale of maritime misadventure

was released in March 2019.

The Vanishing, starring Gerald Butler is a retelling of the events surrounding the disappearance of three men from Flannan Isles Lighthouse in 1900 (see **FT352:40-44**, and Mike Dash, “The Vanishing Lighthousemen of Eilean Mor”, *Fortean Studies*, vol 4, 1998).

Perhaps filmmakers will continue to look to lighthouses for sanctuary in a sea of franchises, hoping to find new stories to explore. What happens out there, with characters alone among the elements, isolated from the real world, will always be a siren song to storytellers; but, in the case of Smalls Lighthouse, fact is as strange, and more morbid, than fiction.

NOTES

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♦ **RIK WORTH** is a freelance journalist and writer. His new comic, *Hocus Pocus*, looking at magic, science and the supernatural, is out this month.

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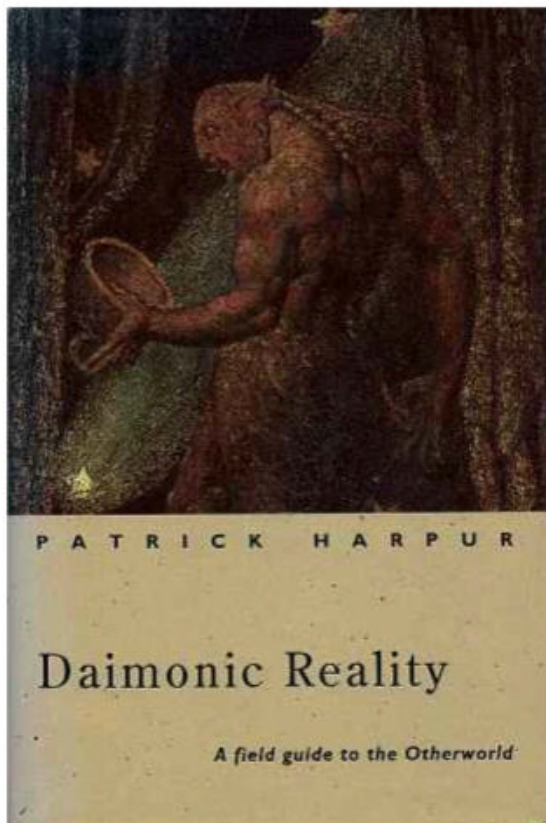
NO 51. NOT QUITE AN EXPLANATION FOR EVERYTHING

Every so often a book appears that, without taking the encyclopedic format, surveys the gamut of fortean phenomena, presents an argument, and derives an hypothesis from it – or at least provides the basis for an intelligent comprehensive reflection on its material. Colin Wilson's *Phenomena* (1978) was one such. Mike Dash's *Borderlands* (1998) was another. Both of these will find a place on this bookshelf in due course.

Between the two came Patrick Harpur's *Daimonic Reality*, which took its cue from Jungian psychology and with, by way of the *anima mundi*, a hefty, refreshing leavening of William Blake's concept – or vision – of Imagination. For some the Jungian flavour may taint it, while the same quality may make others embrace it before a single page is turned. But Harpur's virtue is that he makes a case for taking what he calls the Otherworld seriously without at all demanding that the reader swallow Jungianism whole: the psychological theory is more like a frame on which the line of reasoning is draped and ordered.

We've perhaps given an erroneous impression above of the way this book works. It's less like an esoteric clothes-horse in fine raiment than an unfolding, along a track shaped somewhat like the spiral on a snail's shell, or one of those strange ancient emblems on cave walls that hint at shamanic entoptic visions. Harpur is trying to come to grips with visionary experiences, apparitions, and even artefacts – not quite all of forteana, but taking in a spectrum from angels to aliens, saintly experiences to secular crop circles; even spontaneous human combustion gets a passing nod. *Daimonic Reality* isn't an attempt to explain forteana: Harpur explicitly remains aloof from that kind of crudity, although he's not above making gentle digs at presumptive rationalisations – which beg questions – such as the extraterrestrial hypothesis for UFOs, or the notion that ghosts are revenant spirits of the dead. Rather, it's a cumulative effort to expose the dynamics of apparitional phenomena – how, and to some extent why, they erupt into the quotidian world. While anyone undertaking such a task needs all the help they can get, Harpur has chosen wisely, as we shall see. And the implicit problem for starters is therefore: what then is quotidian reality?

Harpur approaches this monstrous question somewhat as the great Sephardic sage Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) pondered how one might describe or define God. Maimonides concluded that one could say only what God was *not*, and discreetly retreated from the rest.



Harpur argues that what we take as the everyday is underpinned by a whole series of assumptions, which boil down to a “dreary, mechanical materialism”, an outlook that excludes as variously irrational or impossible – and perhaps just a bit *vulgar* – anything that can't be crumbled in the hand, trodden underfoot (by microscope or mathematics, if those boots fit), or otherwise minced with the aid of Aristotle. So far this is no more than Weber proclaimed in his ‘discovery’ of the world's ‘disenchantment’. Which doesn't make his insight untrue. On the

other hand, its truth shouldn't be taken to mean it's complete, the last word. As any scrupulous folklorist can tell you, the wider world was never really disenchanted, as folk tales, council-house poltergeists and grand-mansion ghosts, phantom hitch-hikers, flying saucers, pixie visitors and the rest robustly attest. They never went away. What changed from (roughly) the mid 17th century to the collapse of the French Revolution wasn't people's experiences, but what the establishment deemed the respectable, proper attitude to them, which shifted from broad acceptance to broad, even sometimes vitriolic, disapproval. Harpur considers this cultural repression to have deleterious effects on the psychic health of a society, and thus “if these strange visitations have any purpose at all, it is to subvert the same modern worldview which discredits them.”

But there is a hole in that argument, if left to its own devices. If apparitions in this day and age are a kind of unconsciously propelled anti-establishment protest, that characterisation raises the question of what they were when there was no “modern worldview” to kick against. Harpur calls on various traditional pre-industrial societies to resolve that difficulty. By and large (and at risk of oversimplifying), faeries were just faeries, ghosts were ghosts, and what we with our technological fixations might call aliens were spirits or gods. He gives a humorous account of Rhodesian/Zimbabwean ufologist Cynthia Hind questioning one Clifford Muchena. He had witnessed several tall beings dressed in silvery suits, who were apparently associated with the passing of a large, orange ball of light. He was inclined to think they were ghosts or the spirits of ancestors. But, objected Ms Hind, were silvery overalls appropriate attire for ancestors? Didn't ancestors “wear fur and necklaces of crocodile teeth? ‘Times change,’ said Mr Muchena.” Indeed they do, and no doubt Mr Muchena's own garb reflected the fact.

And so Harpur begins with as a good a brief account as you'll find of the collective unconscious, particularly as a source of psychic overspill, spending some time on Jung's book on flying saucers in the process. He also, early on in the book,

adduces crop circles as a form of apparition. Apart from his accurate history of (ultimately failed) attempts to reduce that ‘phenomenon’ to mysterious workings of meteorology, his rather naïve take on crop art can safely be ignored: “It’s absolute crap,” as more than one veteran, not to say vintage, circle maker has said to us. Well, everybody makes mistakes; and fortunately this lapse doesn’t undermine the rest of the book. The argument from Jung is essentially that flying saucers and crop formations are tulipoid materialisations of imagery from the collective unconscious, a proposition one can buy at face value, as many do. Others prefer to see the term ‘collective unconscious’ as a mystification of a fairly straightforward observation: that in similar circumstances human beings tend to see things (in all senses of the words) in similar ways. But one of Harpur’s aims throughout the book is to (re)habilitate visionary experiences by giving them the context they have been stripped of by the dominance of scientific materialism. Thus he aims to provide not just a useful backstory for contemporary apparitions – a pattern into which they will fit – but also the means by which they can be interpreted: bringing comfort and relief to the otherwise disoriented and bewildered. (We sometimes sense that Harpur is explaining all this to himself as much as to his readers, although he tactfully doesn’t regale us with baffling experiences of his own.)

One can take his reliance on Jung then as a handy metaphor, particularly since he (developing the centripetal spiral of his thought) next invokes the shades of the Neo-Platonists and their concept of the *Anima Mundi*, the soul of the world. So the emanations of the Otherworld are ‘ensouled’, in some sense *alive*, and by implication they and ‘the world’ share in the human collective unconscious, while remaining distinct from it. He notes (he’s not the first to do so) that the whole range of apparitions occurs in places and at times that cross or break boundaries (bridges for instance; or ambiguous occasions such as Hallowe’en) or exist in ill-defined, liminal spaces – trailer parks and caravan sites, for example, which are neither town nor country. By this reckoning, by the way, there ought to be a tradition of oddities occurring in suburbs, at least from when it was possible to distinguish suburb from city central, and one suburb from another without a road sign to tell you. We don’t know of such a study, but if you do, please let us know. Perhaps mischievously, certainly slightly provocatively, Harpur includes urban legends in his account of liminalities, as they straddle the line between fact and fiction, and quotes Lady Gregory wondering aloud whether some of the faery stories she heard were actual experience or legend. We can infer from this that experience, legend,



LEFT: Patrick Harpur, contemplating the gamut of fortean phenomena.

“A BOOK MUST
BE THE AXE
FOR THE
FROZEN SEA
WITHIN US.”

Franz Kafka

fact and fiction all draw elements one from another, and sometimes it takes great effort to disentangle them and find out what is, or was, really going on within any given account. Even true stories, independently documented, from the quotidian world can change over time – and may be subject to endless interpretation (consider the biographies of painters and politicians just for starters).

Having made the case for a kind of sentient and mutable universe, Harpur tops the mix with imagination, through which we make both our ordinary and extraordinary perceptions intelligible. (A similar argument was made by scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi.) Harpur takes William Blake as his touchstone here, whose *locus classicus* on the matter of Imagination-with-a-capital-I comes from his *Vision of the Last Judgment*: “I assert, for myself, that I do not behold the outward creation, and that to me it is hindrance and not action. ‘What!’ it will be questioned, ‘when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?’ Oh! no, no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying ‘Holy, holy, holy

is the Lord God Almighty!’ I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it, and not with it.” That is a description of an awareness of the sacred, which if constant and untempered would drive most of us mad – an aspersion cast at Blake more than once over the years, despite his manifest sanity. The implication is that the myriad entities that inhabit the apparitional universe are in some sense or to some degree sacred.

Citing Samuel Taylor Coleridge and WH Auden to good purpose, Harpur reminds us that there is a *secondary* imagination, which creatively evaluates, orders and ‘places’ the shocks of the primary Imagination. Harpur ties together what one might call his driving forces thus: “The sacred beings are the spontaneously appearing archetypal images [of Jung]. They are our gods and daimons. The advantage of Imagination as a model for daimonic reality is that

it avoids the implication, however residual, of the term ‘collective unconscious’ that it is somehow purely interior, within us – when... it is also external to us. Similarly, the model ‘Soul of the World’ implies the opposite, emphasising externality over internality. The idea of the Imagination draws these two models closer together. Like the collective unconscious it is the source of autonomous sacred beings; like the Soul of the World, it locates these sacred beings just as often in the world as in our psyches (as dreams, visions, etc.). ‘To the eyes of a man of imagination,’ remarked Blake, ‘Nature is imagination itself.’”

Having armed his reader – and himself – with these seminal thoughts, Harpur is free to recount and ponder on all manner of further visionary and apparitional phenomena. He’s pleasingly dismissive of literalists, but on occasion too ready to take the words of pranksters, frauds and the deluded too literally – though to be fair, their ventures into artificial daimonicity are not significantly different from what one can believe without undue qualification. Paul Screeton, an early reviewer (*Magonia* 50 September 1994), sums up Harpur’s endeavour perfectly: “Naturally the author [is] aware that the book’s perspective is partial and incomplete. Nevertheless it is a remarkable *tour de force*.” Definitely worth more than one read – and it’s eminently readable; and you’ll be pleased to know it’s among the esteemed and erudite FT editor’s all-time Top Ten fortean volumes. He hasn’t confided what the other nine are yet. We have the garlic and herbs ready for when he does.

Patrick Harpur, *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld*, Viking Arkana, 1994

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Widening our horizons

Alan Murdie examines a very welcome collection which opens up how researchers can explore links between the paranormal and the natural world

Greening the Paranormal

Exploring the Ecology of Extraordinary Experience

ed. Jack Hunter

August Night Press/White Crow Publishing 2019

Pb, 312pp, £12.99 ISBN 9781786771094

Arthur C Clarke once described science fiction as the only consciousness-expanding form of literature. *Greening the Paranormal* is a timely book seeking to achieve exactly such an expansion in thinking for those interested in paranormal research. Edited by anthropologist Jack Hunter, it features contributions from a variety of writers who believe there is a close connection between psychic experience and the natural world.

Hunter argues for anomaly and paranormal researchers to embrace an ecological dimension in their work. Identifying the paranormal as the “intersect between an object other and participatory subjectivity”, he maintains that accepting the paranormal in all its “weirdness and complexity” is a necessity for both future research and our wider relations with the natural world.

Appealing particularly to psi researchers, he calls for a widening of horizons and the need to venture beyond their current confining methodologies. Researchers should engage in more open-minded field studies, not imposing arbitrary limits upon what may be investigated, and ruling no alleged phenomena out of bounds. This means taking the intellectual step of actively acknowledging the possibility of interaction with non-human intelligences co-existent upon Earth with us. Such a recognition paves the way for potential contact with not only recognised life-forms but

also extraterrestrials and spiritual entities, “gods, goddesses, angels, poltergeists, faeries, ufonauts, spirits of the dead”.

By admitting an objective element to such experiences, Hunter believes we may be taking a vital step in breaking down ossified structures of materialist thinking which have caused so much of the ecological damage afflicting our planet and which are now being recognised as threatening our long-term survival prospects.

Hunter’s arguments supply a loose framework for the following chapters which variously reflect objective and subjective approaches to anomalous phenomena occurring in the wider environment. No mere echo chamber of contemporary environmental and metaphysical concerns, this collection is permeated with highly intriguing speculations from contributors including spiritual practitioners, artists and environmental activists. All identify paranormal and transcendent aspects in human relations with the natural world. Mixed in are more methodological chapters from social scientists, anthropologists and psychologists seeking to extend the boundaries of their disciplines outside their current ideological enclosures, resulting in a very forteen book indeed.

Charles Fort himself is praised at the outset for his iconoclastic thinking in a meditative polemic by Cody Meycock on science and its detrimental social and environmental impacts.

Pursuing traditional cosmologies, Amba J Sepie writes on the indigenous wisdom of the Kogi people in Colombia. Influenced by indigenous First Nation beliefs from North America, Nancy Wisser examines mystical exper-

“We may be taking a vital step in breaking down ossified structures of thinking”

iences in childhood and Lance Foster considers guardian spirits and how he no longer recognises a distinction between normal and paranormal experiences. Trickster theory is proposed by Jacob Glazier as an approach for making sense of the elusive and contradictory nature of phenomena, an aspect which other theoreticians have so far failed to explain. Christine Simmonds-

Moore probes liminal experiences and the enchanted boundaries between self and places where uncanny encounters cluster, while Mark A Schroll looks at the ecological aspects of sacred sites. Unsurprisingly, both find natural environments conducive to paranormal and mystical experiences.

The possibility that other species – plant, animal, alien – may actually be communicating with us is raised by several contributors. Viktoria Duda shares her sensations of a connection with nature achieved by immersion in mountain landscapes in northern Hungary, and Maya Ward writes of the importance of listening to nature, inspired partly by weeks spent following traditional pathways across Australia.

David Luke explores the idea that one can extract veridical information direct from plants by ingesting hallucinogens. Examples of meaningful messages delivered by birds such as kingfishers are discussed by Brian Taylor.

Silvia Mutterle considers the symbiotic and healing relationship with certain animal species encountered in shamanistic societies. From the realm of cryptozoology Susan Marsh wonders if urbanisation flushes cryptids into greater visibility today, as harbingers of the damage being wrought upon the planet.

Regarding apparent extraterrestrial contact, Simon Wilson speculates on the meaning of UFO encounters and ideas which treat earthlights as angels that convey messages from the Earth itself. Timothy Grieve-Carlson analyses the esoteric and ecological dimensions in Whitley Strieber’s *Communion* writings.

The final chapter, “Psychic Naturalism”, is by Elorah Fangrad, Rick Fehr and Christopher Laursen, who are pursuing an ongoing and multi-discipline academic research project at a haunted lodge situated deep in the Ontario forests.

While welcoming this volume, and personally sympathetic to many of the ideas expressed, I consider we will still require much help from materialistic science to reverse decades of environmental damage. This will need to be combined with much hard-nosed political engagement.

In addition to advocating that psi researchers adopt ecological perspectives, *Greening the Paranormal* may also serve to re-invigorate the forteen field of “earth mysteries” by encouraging new directions of study and research. For those who are flexible in their thinking, able to tolerate ambiguities and enjoy engaging with bold challenges to their own belief-systems, this proves a very thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating book.

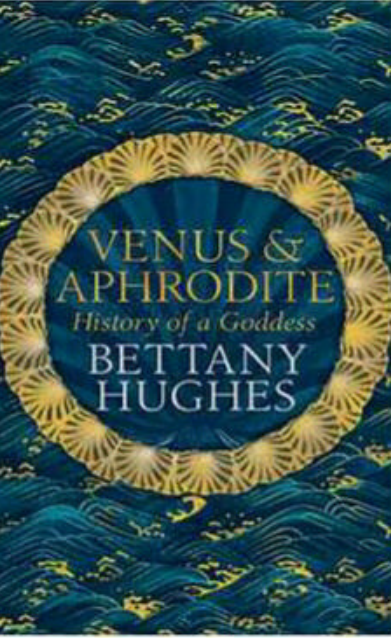
Alan Murdie

★★★★★



A goddess evolves

Venus-Aphrodite has survived so powerfully for so long by constantly reinventing herself



Venus and Aphrodite

History of a Goddess

Bettany Hughes

Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2019
Hb, 241pp, £12.99, illus, plates, bib, ind
ISBN 9781474610360

Whether we know her as the Roman Venus or the Greek Aphrodite, the goddess of love and lust is as powerful today as she has always been.

In this beautifully illustrated book, TV historian Bettany Hughes traces Venus-Aphrodite back to her beginnings and follows her career over millennia, right up to the present day.

Aphrodite's "ancestors", Inanna, Ishtar and Astarte, were powerful goddesses: "Desire – for control, blood, fear, dominance, rapture, justice, adrenaline, ecstasy – can lead both to making war and to making love, to churn and change of all kinds," Hughes writes. "Authors from Homer onwards have conflated the words used for military invasion and sexual penetration." Strong stuff. So how did this powerful, stropky, almost militaristic goddess come to be the softly voluptuous figure beloved of Titian, Rubens, Boticelli and Velázquez, whose Rokeby Venus at the National Gallery

was famously slashed by a suffragette in 1914 because "men gawped at it all day long"?

Myths are not only transformative but are themselves transformed over millennia.

Once established in Greece, Aphrodite became the patron of prostitutes; and as Hughes points out: "It is a sobering thought that the greatest trade in prostitutes came from the human booty of warfare; prostitutes were truly Aphrodite's children, since she was a patron of both copulation and conflict."

But as warfare between nations became more organised, the female role in society became more marginalised. The world became more male-dominated and misogynistic, and this degraded perception of mortal women became applied to the body of the goddess herself. Having previously been ornately clad, from the 4th century BC Aphrodite-Venus "starts to shed her raiments" to the male gaze; one of the most famous statues was *Venus Callipyge*, "Venus with the beautiful buttocks".

With the coming of Christianity, Venus was initially desecrated – but then she flexed her muscles. She had demonstrated for millennia that "humans wanted the comfort and stimulation of a strong, sympathetic female presence as an intercessor with the supernatural world"; now she reinvented herself as the Virgin Mary. Today she takes on new roles, in art, fashion, advertising; she is still potent.

Aphrodite-Venus, Hughes concludes, "is far more than just a gorgeous goddess of love; she is an incarnation of, and a guide through, the messy, troubling, quixotic, quickening business of mortal life."

David V Barrett
★★★★★

Coffinmaker's Blues

Collected Writings on Terror

Stephen Volk

PS Publishing 2019
Hb, 306pp, £25, ISBN 9781786363947

Mention the name Stephen Volk to an *FT* reader and the first thing they will think of is *Ghostwatch*. This is completely understandable. The programme had a huge cultural impact, and wraps up many forteen topics in one place, including hauntings, the blurred line between reality and fiction, the trust placed in public figures, moral panics and mass hysteria.

As you would expect, *Ghostwatch* is covered in *Coffinmaker's Blues*, a collection built around Volk's columns for TTA Press and *Black Static* magazine. Yet there is so much more to his career and his writing than that single occasion of terrifying the nation.

Stephen Volk is a writer. That might seem obvious, but it's worth emphasising, because one of the themes running through *Coffinmaker's Blues* is a precise exploration of where the writer is positioned in the worlds of TV and film.

He captures the frustrations and complexities of navigating this territory with script in hand, trying to keep a story together while different forces influence the final product. While he does not often name names, he is uncompromising in his criticism and knows where the bodies are buried (particularly of scripts cut or never reaching their final hurdle). There is honesty here. The chapter "In Purgatory: On Script Development" is particularly exposing and visceral (but not in a horror way), showing Volk's own wounds over the years from stories getting trapped in production companies and tied up with script development. The reason why Stephen Volk is so blunt is because he cares. He cares about quality writing, he cares about writers, and he cares about horror.

This final topic is the main focus of the book, and where you see that you're in the presence of someone who is passionate and knowledgeable about his subject. You might disagree with

his opinions (there are over 50 articles gathered here, so total consensus is unlikely) but you can never doubt his insight.

Themes covered include children in horror, Dennis Wheatley, the influence of Nigel Kneale, horror in mainstream films, and the relationship between religion and horror, among many others. Volk's approach to all of these is thoughtful and considered, for example talking about Guillermo del Toro's child's viewpoint in his films:

"In *Pan's Labyrinth*, for instance, there is no physical or cinematic boundary between fantasy and reality: the one is as dangerous and tangible as the other. At least in the mind of the girl. Which is what matters. Also, his Hellboy is like an overgrown toddler who doesn't really fit in an adult world (mentally or physically), often doesn't know his own strength, and often – deliberately or accidentally – pisses off the grown-ups."

Or about short story writers: "Borges showed me the fantastical can be concise, anecdotal, even read like a footnote in a history book. While at the other end of the stylistic scale Angela Carter's unapologetically baroque language delivered a wry feminism via twisted, carnivalesque gags and loud, crashing symbolism."

While each article gathered here is fairly short in itself, it never feels as if he is skimming the surface, and as a whole themes are picked up and carried through the book, making it feel coherent and complete. As an aside, it's also nice to see *Fortean Times* get a number of mentions throughout.

Coffinmaker's Blues is part of the Midnight Movie Monographs series edited by Neil Snowdon, and continues the quality of this series.

If you're interested in writing as a profession, particularly screenwriting, this book is for you. If you have a love for horror in all its many forms, this book is for you. If you're interested in the phenomena of *Ghostwatch*, this the book is for you. A well written personal exploration of horror, writing, and their place within the world.

Steve Toase
★★★★★





America Before

The Key to Earth's Lost Civilisation

Graham Hancock

Hodder & Stoughton 2019

Hb, 608pp, £25, plates, illus, notes, bib, ind
ISBN 9781473660571

President Trump would delight in this book's in-your-face, centre-stage USA message: truly an America First read.

Unusually within this genre of "alternative" (aka pseudo-) archaeology, the title does not misrepresent the contents. Hancock's grand pitch is that the world's shaman-led, "precociously early civilisation" (who were telepathic and telekinetic) was extant in the middle of the Ice Age and centred in the mid-USA, but was destroyed 12,800 years ago by a "dangerous bolide" (comet) that melted the huge North American ice sheets with biblical flooding and sudden, Atomic Winter-style climate change (north of the Equator), leaving just enough traces to allow for years of books by himself and others. (Surely telekinesis is about the only effective weapon there can be against comet strikes!)

Hancock states that he is coming to the end of his life's work, and as a sign of weariness there is the constant referral to his earlier books. His non-travelogue text has a languor about it as he manages to be parochial, folksy and demagogic, colouring his prose towards the purple. There is more than a hint of hearing an old-time preacher at an Appalachian revivalist tent meeting spitting venom and threatening vengeance at all non-believers (aka archaeologists and most scientists). Hancock "takes up serpents" starting with the "almost" astronomically aligned Serpent Mound, Ohio. There is a detailed, honey-dipped account of his visits to the Altai foothills in Siberia (fresh farm food, poor roads but welcoming natives) to visit the Denisova caves, "arguably the most important archaeological site in the world", detouring to photograph granitic snake-like outcrops. Are these shapes man-made? he asks (no, they are naturally intersecting conjugate joint sets and pareidolia).

Hancock's travelogues are

enjoyable and give a welcome break to the often laboured exposition of his main themes. The pilgrimage to the "cathedral-like" cave is a central pillar for Hancock, for (together with linguistics and ethnobotany) his book builds upon two pieces of 21st-century science, namely large numbers of ancient and modern DNA data and the investigation into the cause(s) and results of the Younger Dryas event.

The Younger Dryas, a deep reversal in the Late Pleistocene warming episode, began about 12,900 years ago and ended very suddenly about 11,600 years ago with a global warming of 10°C within a century, perhaps even a single decade. This is Hancock's third book to feature the Younger Dryas Stadial and its possible extraterrestrial cause, and irrespective of his use of the

data, he presents a timely reminder of how swiftly climate change can happen – and has happened.

Elsewhere there is much Amazonian talk of lost cities, magical uber-fertile soils and transforming

herbals, all subtle hints of an earlier more majestic and mystical time for the region. He cites shared similarities between the DNA and language diversity of the peoples of Amazonia and Oceania to suggest direct sea-borne links (naturally using highly accurate, but now lost, maps). As is common in this genre there are other cross-temporal/spatial proofs of an ancient knowledge including similarities between the Mississippi Mound builders and the Pharaonic Egyptians.

To his credit, although there is much use of secondary and tertiary sources, primary papers are cited as shown by 60 pages of notes – a useful resource. Naturally he finds old Aunt Sallies to knock down, and his use of scientific data and authority is biased; almost all his positions in the various scientific debates are "paradigm-busting", but he fails to appreciate, or perhaps ignores, nuance within scientific arguments. Indeed nuance is a foreign concept, encapsulated in his spectacular reinterpretation of the adage "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence"; he suggests that the total lack of any "old" (meaning mid-Pleistocene) archaeology in

the USA is a major proof that it was indeed the core site for the ur-civilisation.

Enjoy the illustrations, many by Hancock's wife Santha Faiia, envy their travels, but above all comb, read and balance the primary sources in the footnotes and Hancock's text.

Rob Ixer

★★★★★

Diabolical Possession and the Case Behind The Exorcist

Sergio A Rueda

McFarland & Co 2018

Pb, 265pp, £9.99, photos, appx, notes, bib, ind
ISBN 9781476673844

William Friedkin's 1973 movie *The Exorcist*, adapted from the novel by William Peter Blatty, profoundly affected how we think about exorcism and possession. That it was supposedly based on the genuine case of "Roland Doe" only deepened the horror. The records of the 1949 exorcism rites upon an American teenage boy were not released by the Catholic Church and the boy remained officially anonymous. Subsequent investigative work revealed the family name and locations, and doubt was cast upon the legitimacy of the story.

This book presents several new aspects of the "Roland Doe" case and links it to the cinematic portrayal. Via verbal and written accounts, the author compares the case with the film depiction and briefly indicates the social and religious influences on novelist Blatty.

Rueda accidentally discovered correspondence between Father Schulze, the Lutheran pastor of the afflicted family, and parapsychologist JB Rhine while browsing the archives of the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, formerly the Duke Parapsychology lab. Because of Schulze's interest in parapsychology, he first suspected the family was experiencing a poltergeist incident and contacted Rhine in March 1949. Schulze, who was interviewed along with his wife for this book, was convinced that something strange was

going on with the boy but he did not consider it diabolical. The family, however, soon came to believe that the incidents were related to their straying from the Catholic faith. After consulting a spiritual healer, they called on Catholic clergy, excluding Schulze and Rhine before Rhine could investigate for himself.

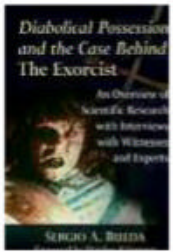
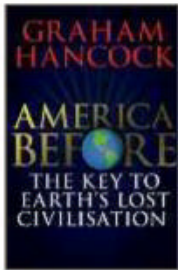
Included in the documents recovered by Rueda was a copy of a journal from March and April 1949 written by a priest who was witness to the Roman ritual of exorcism on "Roland" (whose real name is revealed as Ronald). Reproduced across several chapters, with commentary, the "Jesuit diary" is referenced by the author to cite missteps taken by the priests. Rueda, trained in medical and religious studies, examines possible hypotheses to explain Ronald's case, ultimately concluding that the Jesuits undertook the rite of exorcism without adequate evidence or preparation and failed to follow its rules. He is convinced that the suggestion of exorcism prompted Ronald and his family to conform to what was expected. The causes of the

strange events are discussed in terms of unsubstantiated percentages – for example, there's a "40 per cent" chance that this was a poltergeist event with a "very low" possibility of demon possession.

Though it contains various new nuggets of interest, the book is about 40 per cent too long, padded with excessive repetition, extraneous verbatim interviews (including a bizarre section where the author interviews himself) and clunky Q&A sections. Important bits are scattered or buried throughout, not always emphasised or put into context. The timeline jumps around and the chapters are disjointed, making for a frustrating read. There are blatant terminological errors. The author uses some questionable web sources while leaving out the important work of Mark Opsasnick, who exposed Ronald's case in 2006. Adding to this poor packaging is the lurid cover featuring the image of possessed Regan from *The Exorcist*. It's an inconsistent, frequently confusing treatment of some fascinating material.

Sharon A Hill

★★★★★



Dreamlike themes

A 19th-century poet and writer of dark, weird, supernatural tales is brought out of undeserved obscurity

Of Kings and Things

Strange Tales and Decadent Poems

Count Stanislaus Eric Stenbock; edited by David Tibet

Strange Attractor Press 2019

Hb/Pb, 360pp, illus, bib, £40/£15.99, ISBN 978190722573

In his anthology *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, WB Yeats describes the fin de siècle, decadent, Pre-Raphaelite-era author and poet Stanislaus Eric Stenbock (1860-1895) as a “scholar, connoisseur, drunkard, poet, pervert, most charming of men”.

Despite this endorsement, in the years since his death, Stenbock’s distinctive body of work – his meagre output, three thin volumes of verse and one book of short stories, all of them published in small, privately-printed editions – has languished in unfortunate obscurity.

A reappraisal of this fascinating body of work is long overdue; *Of Kings and Things* is a selection of Stenbock’s finest work under the careful stewardship of editor David Tibet.

Stenbock was born to the daughter of a wealthy German cotton importer and an Estonian aristocrat. Following his father’s death, his mother remarried a clerk who later obtained the position of Permanent Secretary in the British Treasury. As a result, financially speaking, Stenbock lived a charmed life.

He was a sickly child, spent much of his upbringing in German private schools, and briefly attended Oxford, which he left before obtaining his degree. Originally a Protestant, Stenbock converted to Roman Catholicism, much to his family’s dismay. Given his extravagances,

which were decidedly not limited to his religiosity, his stepfather placed him on a rather strict allowance.

From an early age, Stenbock exhibited artistic tendencies. At only 21 years of age he published his first book, a small collection of dark, densely allusive, richly textured poems that went largely unnoticed.

This was followed by a second volume, *Myrtle, Rue, And Cypress* (1883), which consists of frequently supernatural-themed poems. Stenbock dedicated the collection to several young men, including Simeon Solomon, a tragic pre-Raphaelite painter who 10 years earlier had been criminally prosecuted for a

homosexual liaison in a public toilet. Again, the volume was ignored.

In considerable debt to his printers due to a lack of sales, Stenbock escaped to Europe, and while there he experienced some comparative impoverishment. He also apparently suffered from mental

illness. He travelled frequently during this period and it is said that he was always accompanied by a life-sized doll made of wood; he called this doll *le petit comte* and believed it to be his son.

Stenbock’s fortunes improved when, in 1885, he inherited a vast Estonian estate from his grandfather, and took up residence in the estate’s palatial manor, cohabitating with his cousin, Theophile von Bodisco, and other relatives. Stenbock lived in considerable luxury, yet he soon tired of Estonian provincialism, and longed for the familiarity of English life.

He returned to London in 1887 and came to associate with some of the best-known talents of the day, including Oscar Wilde, the artist Aubrey Beardsley, publisher Ernest Rhys, and poet Arthur Symons.

In 1893, Stenbock published his last volume of poems, the decidedly melancholic *The Shadow of Death*. He also dabbled in the short story form. Only one book of short stories was published in his lifetime, *Studies of Death: Romantic Tales* (1894).

The same year, Stenbock submitted his “supernatural time-slip play” (in Tibet’s description), *La Mazurka des Revenants*, for consideration in *The Yellow Book*; the work was ultimately rejected due to space considerations.

Stenbock died the following year after he collapsed during an apparent drunken, psychotic rampage in which he attempted to attack someone, possibly a housekeeper, with a fire poker; the likely cause of death was cirrhosis, the culmination of a lifetime of drug abuse.

Given the prevalence of poetry in his previously published work, *Of Kings and Things*, interestingly enough, primarily comprises a selection of Stenbock’s finest prose efforts, including 15 of his best stories, with eight poems of varying length and an autobiographical essay.

This handsome edition is illustrated with a number of fascinating portraits of Stenbock and his family and associates and, most welcome, reproductions of his original books, themselves lovely objets d’art.

Modern readers of Stenbock’s work should find it a revelation; at his best, Stenbock’s stories anticipate similar dreamlike themes, subjects, and stylistic devices in the weird fiction stories of subsequent decades – everything from werewolves to vampires to demonic pacts, among other occult subjects – and his lush poetry, despite its Roman Catholic overtones, certainly ranks amongst the most depressingly morbid, death-obsessed verse of its era.

Eric Hoffman

★★★★★

The Spooky Isles Book of Horror, Vol.1

Eds: Andrew Garvey & David Sanderson

Dark Sheep Books 2018

Pb, 299pp, bios, £7.99, ISBN 9781916422704

Who doesn’t like a horror anthology? For many of a certain age, the lurid Pan collections of the 1960s and 1970s have left an indelible mark, and it is pleasing to see that the tradition continues.

The guiding hand behind this compilation is David Sanderson, founder and managing editor of the *Spooky Isles* website, which is populated with tales of the weird and the wonderful submitted by its loyal followers.

In two concise introductions, he and his colleague Andrew Garvey comment on how the book came about, and one has a real feeling of a true labour of love.

What stands out is the diversity of the 21 tales. It would be impossible to ignore the persistence of such figures as Arthur Machen and MR

James in many of the stories, but this has not limited the volume’s thematic scope. Each story has a brief account of the source material that compelled the author to write the tale, an interesting idea and one that may appeal to those new to the genre.

The opening tale, “The Black Dog”, draws upon English and Irish legends of the shadowy foreboding canine; fairy lore is explored in “Creatures of Rath and Bone”, and the tale of the Hungry Man from the Irish oral tradition is brought up to date in “Hunger”.

There is something for everyone, whether you like your fiction romantic or wrought with folk horror, premised in mythology or simply bloody. This volume brings to light new writers with new takes on familiar horror staples.

Looking though the potted biographies, it’s great to see that the authors are drawn from all walks of life and their work arises out of a real passion to thrill and beguile.

Perfect bedtime reading!

Chris Hill

★★★★★





COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Ghoster

Thom Burgess, Toby Meakins, Joe Becci
Download free from ghosterworld.com

This graphic novella is a lovely little thing, with a well-developed mythology of its own and a perfect hook for fortians in the use of 50 Berkeley Square (one of London's most famous 'haunted houses') as the story's main location. *Ghoster* is about a group of five families who work to protect England from Malevolents (evil ghosts with particular appetites). The story focuses on two young members of the five families as they embark on their Gallowing, a rite of passage to become Ghosters. The artwork is beautiful and the story has enough twists and turns to keep it fresh. The mix of technology and folklore in the storytelling is well realised, and with the introduction of the idea of Blackhanders it captures something of the darker side of the British islander psyche, which feels very relevant in the current climate. I'd highly recommend visiting the website to get a copy – and I hope the next volume isn't long in coming.

The Complete Future Shocks, Vol 2

Various writers and artists
Rebellion, 2019
Pb, 272pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781781086834



'Tharg's Future Shocks', 2000AD's series of one-off comic strips were an incubator, test bench and mad scientist laboratory all rolled into one.

This was where some of the best-known names in modern comics got their start and, more importantly, were able to experiment. The strips collected here mostly have a sci-fi angle, often heavy with humour and satire, and like much of the best sci-fi they hold up a mirror to contemporary society, something 2000AD has always excelled at. Many of the writers (or 'script robots' in 2000AD speak) here will be familiar, including the late Steve Moore, Alan Moore, Gary Rice, Alan Grant and John Wagner. There are others, possibly less well known to the general reader, such as Alan Hebden, who now writes comic scripts for *Commando*. On the visual side, the collection includes strips drawn by over 25 artists, including Bryan Talbot, John Higgins and Dave Gibbons. Most of them are black and white, part of that British tradition of monochrome comics that capture personality and character so brilliantly. We should also remember the letterers, usually passed over in reviews; after all, comics are for reading, and a good letterer can add a lot to the experience. Here you'll see work by John Aldrich, Peter Knight, and Steve Potter among many others. The book also contains a reprint of an excellent short essay by Alan Moore about starting in comics, which discusses some of the 'Future Shocks' stories he penned and puts them in context. While some of the references in the stories are very much of their time, what endures is the emphasis on personality and how people behave in different situations.

The Wicked + The Divine, Vol 9: 'Okay'

Kieron Gillen, Jamie McKelvie
Image Comics, 2019
Pb, 168pp, £15.99 ISBN 9781534312494



Every 90 years, 12 gods return as young people. They are loved. They are hated. In two years, they are all dead. That simple premise encompasses the whole of *The Wicked + The Divine* (*WicDiv*).

What Gillen, McKelvie, and their various collaborators have accomplished has been stunning, building a very distinctive mythology that draws on very old themes and updates them for a contemporary world. Gillen understands modern pop culture, and effectively draws parallels between it and older modes of worship. It might seem strange to review the final collection of a nine-volume story: if you've been following the series, you know what you're in for, and if you haven't, then the final arc might not be the best jumping-on point. Yet, if you're going to devote time to a nine-volume story, then it's useful to know that the ending will be satisfying – I'm here to tell you that it is. There are genuine heartbreaking moments, redemptions, and conclusions that make sense of what's come before. The precision and clarity of McKelvie's art is enhanced by the stunning work of colourist Matthew Wilson: this is a beautiful comic. If you've never read *WicDiv* before, start at the beginning knowing that you have a treat waiting for you. If you're already reading *WicDiv*, you don't need me to persuade you to buy this final part of the story.

One: Just One Breath

Sylvain Cordurié, Zivorad Radivojevic
Le Lombard (Belgium) via Europe Comics

46pp, £3.99, available via www.europecomics.com/album/1-just-one-breath/



Before we get to the comic, a word of explanation about Europe Comics, a 13-partner, pan-European alliance with the mission of bringing the rich European comic tradition to the English-speaking world, where it's often overlooked. (I would highly recommend checking out their potted histories of comic traditions in different countries.) *One: Just One Breath* was first published in 2009 in French, and is the first of three volumes. The story follows Julian Leathercore, a 'bloodcog' whose near-telepathic abilities allow him to read molecules carried by bodily fluids. The

comic starts with an explosion and a murder, before pulling the focus out to start looking at all the strands of the story. In some ways this is a political comic, with conspiracies and special interests in play, but there's enough action to carry the story forward. As might be expected with the first in a three volume series, it lays a lot of groundwork, and not all of the reader's questions are answered by the end. If you're looking for an entry point into European comics, this is a good place to start.

Misty Presents The Jordi Badia Romero Collection

Jordi Badia Romero, various writers
Rebellion, 2019
Pb, 128pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781781086896



Misty ran from 1978 to 1980. Aimed at the girl's comic market, it differed from its peers in focusing on horror stories, mostly with a gothic bent. This collection brings together strips drawn by the Catalan artist Jordie Badia Romero, who got his start illustrating Spanish romance and adventure comics alongside his brother. By the 1970s he was working on British comics such as *Battle* and *Dr Who*, before drawing for the short-lived *Spellbound* and moving on to *Misty*. Here you'll find demons, vampires, flesh-eating birds, intelligent snails and arsonists – even Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos shows a tentacle in a story or two. What's refreshing to see is that the women in the strips have agency: they ride motorbikes, fight back, ignore angry uncles, and make decisions that create their own stories. The artwork is lush – as the introduction says, Romero had a talent for drawing women – with echoes of the Gothic book covers which are now coveted for their pulp artwork. The writers remain uncredited, although they included Pat Mills, Malcolm Shaw and (maybe) Barry Clements. *Misty* is an important part of British comic book history, and this makes an excellent introduction.

SEND REVIEW DISCS TO: FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 71602, LONDON E17 0QD, UK.

No light in the darkness

Robert Eggers's follow-up to *The Witch*, inspired by a real-life tale of isolation and madness at sea, is another not-quite horror movie, as well as a stubbornly opaque and bodily fluid-filled head-scratcher



The Lighthouse

Dir Robert Eggers, Canada/US
2019

On UK release from 31 Jan

This is the second feature by director Robert Eggers, following his well-received debut *The Witch*, a slow-moving, oblique period psychological drama. It has been said the distributors erred in marketing *The Witch* as a horror film, and if that's true, then they've repeated the mistake. The film has already garnered many plaudits and was rapturously received at the London Film Festival; but despite high hopes, I left the cinema disappointed.

It tells the story of grizzled lighthouse keeper Tom (Willem Dafoe) and his assistant Ephraim (Robert Pattinson), who arrive on a bleak rocky island to tend the lighthouse there. Their quarters are ramshackle, but the lighthouse is scrupulously well maintained. As the days go by, Tom and Ephraim's relationship goes from antagonistic to something approaching friendship, mostly fuelled by marathon drinking sessions. But the alcohol also seems to induce in Ephraim feelings of paranoia and nightmarish visions. When, after four weeks, their scheduled relief doesn't arrive, the situation

*It's like something
by Harold Pinter,
but with added
tentacles*

quickly begins to unravel.

I wouldn't describe *The Lighthouse* as a horror film. It contains horror elements, but I don't think its primary purpose is to frighten you. Similarly, it isn't a thriller. If pressed, I'd call it a psychological drama – dealing as it does with themes of isolation, latent violence, inability to communicate, and deception. In that sense, it's more like something by Harold Pinter, but with added tentacles.

The film has clearly been made with great skill and intelligence, there's plenty to mull over after the credits have rolled, and the two lead performances (which are, more or less, the only performances) are an object lesson in commitment; it wouldn't surprise me at all if there are Oscar nominations in February. But this is one of those cases where the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

There are three major problems for me. First, it's way,

way too long at a shade under two hours. For a film which has no plot to speak of, that's an extraordinary length of time. Secondly, and this compounds the first, it is deliberately paced (polite film critic speak for slow) and repetitive. There are umpteen scenes of Tom and Ephraim arguing the toss over dinner or getting smashed and singing sea shanties. There are umpteen scenes of pissing, farting and onanism that seem to reflect a great desire on the director's part to rub the viewer's nose in filth. (In this respect it is rivalled only by *Hard to Be a God*, reviewed in these pages some years ago.) There are several speeches, mainly by Tom, that seem endless. Of course, it could be argued that the repetition is to provide contrast to the chaos that follows, but this is labouring the point.

Which brings me to the third and biggest problem: what is that point? I have no problem with ambiguity in cinema, but this is almost impenetrably opaque. A lot of what is on screen appears to mean nothing to anyone but the director, and I wondered whether he was at all interested in communicating it to the viewer. To me, it seemed a jarring combination of several Greek myths, primarily Sisyphus

and Prometheus, and *Waiting for Godot*. Is the film an allegory of a war between a god and a titan? Or is it a kind of purgatory, where one character is being judged by the other before being directed to his final destination? Your guess is as good as mine.

Daniel King



American Gods: Season 2

Created by Bryan Fuller, US 2019
Studiocanal, £15.99/£12.99

The first season of *American Gods* was reviewed favourably in *FT* last year (FT367:69), so this second season was eagerly anticipated.

For the uninitiated, the plot can be boiled down to this: old world gods, led by Odin, brought to America by their immigrant followers, have seen their powers wane as new gods – Media, Technology, Money – increasingly monopolise faith and belief. Fearing their ultimate destruction, Odin is preparing for a final reckoning with these new deities by travelling around the US enlisting the aid of as many of the old gods as he can.

The second season begins with the gathering of the old gods at Odin's request – a get-together interrupted by a shocking assassination. Initially weakened, Odin's alliance is nevertheless galvanised when the other gods – including new characters such as Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction – realise the peril they are in and the necessity of working together.

The strengths of the first season were its epic narrative, intelligent script, top notch cast and fascinating exploration of ancient cultures, religions and myths. Some of those strengths are also evident in the second season but, crucially, not all.

Beset by production



difficulties, *American Gods* lost its show-runners not once but twice, had budgetary issues, cut the number of episodes, shed important cast members, notably Gillian Anderson, and endured all manner of rewrites. There was friction between the network and the production company. It seems that most of those involved in the show had lost faith in the whole project.

Unfortunately, these problems are reflected on screen, particularly in the dialogue. It veered towards the oblique in season one but stayed just on the right side of pretentiousness; in season two it does not. So much of the dialogue is whispered or recited slowly in order to imbue it with a significance it just doesn't have, that at times it's laughable. Some of the characters seem to speak exclusively in riddles or feeble aphorisms, to the extent that you feel you're not so much receiving wisdom direct from a deity as being assaulted by a mountain of banal 'inspirational' quotes. In a doomed attempt to make up for the script quality, some of the cast overact like mad, which makes matters even worse.

However, there are some stand-out moments amid the mediocrity. The development of the Mad Sweeney character (a foul-mouthed leprechaun) is a treat, and the scenes between him and Laura the revenant are among the season's highlights. The carousel sequence in the opening episode is stunning, as we see the old gods in their true colours and finery. The sequence where Odin bids farewell to his faithful 'steed' Betty (a black 1966 Cadillac) by leaving it on the tracks ahead of a speeding train is stirring stuff, even more so as the credits roll over a recording of Leadbelly singing 'Black Betty' – a genuine synthesis of myth, music and visuals.

The season ends with the story unfinished. My fervent hope is that over the next few months the money men and the creative team are able to unite behind a vision for what should be the third and final season, because despite its weaknesses, the series deserves it.

Daniel King



On the Trail of... Champ

Dir Aleksandar Petakov, US 2018
Small Town Monsters, \$19.99 (DVD)

FT readers will be familiar with 'Champ', an alleged creature or group of creatures occupying the waters of Lake Champlain, a large freshwater body sitting between the northern border of Vermont and upstate New York, and fondly referred to as 'America's Loch Ness'. Small Town Monsters, which has made a number of serviceable documentaries on various cryptozoological and fortean subjects in and around the US (Mothman, Boggy Creek, the Flatwoods Monster) has produced an interesting, if workmanlike, overview of the phenomenon, its history, and its effect on the local community.

The filmmakers are careful to point out that given the lengthy timespan involved – which includes sightings among the Native Abenaki and Iroquois populations, those made by 19th century European explorers, and others in later American history (including the famous 1977 sighting and photograph by Sandra Mansi) – credible accounts of creature sightings (which number just over 300 in total), are, as with its famous Scottish counterpart, relatively rare. Yet, despite this, the possible existence of the creature has had a profound effect on the local community, from providing predictable opportunities for economic exploitation – Champ is a mascot for everything from local businesses to baseball teams – to sparking the imagination of amateur researchers, biologists, and historians.

Constructed as a five-episode mini-series, on the surface *Champ* is something of a departure from the Small Town Monsters format, though it otherwise repeats the style and mood of previous entries. While on the whole nicely assembled, the episode divisions are largely arbitrary, with the early ones addressing the history of a phenomenon and later ones addressing the effect of the lake monster on local folklore and culture. The documentary features interviews

with living eyewitnesses and independent researchers Scott Mardis, William Dranginis, and Katy Elizabeth; their interviews are balanced with cautionary evaluations by sceptics, giving the documentary a refreshingly exhaustive and objective tone. Though *Champ* doesn't break any new ground in either content or style, it remains an enjoyable foray into fortean cinema, and is certainly worth a look. As an added bonus, the DVD's cover art by Vermont-based artist Stephen Bissette – also briefly interviewed – is phenomenal.

Eric Hoffman



High Life

Dir Claire Denis, UK/France 2018
Thunderbird, £12.99 (Blu-ray)

Spaceship 7, crewed by former prisoners, is on a mission to investigate the possibilities of using a black hole as a new energy source. At some stage things have gone horribly wrong and now only Monte (Robert Pattinson) and Willow (Scarlett Lindsey), a very noisy 14-month-old baby, occupy the vessel.

Through flashbacks we slowly discover how the other members of the motley crew met their fate. First to go is Captain Chandra (Lars Eidinger) who suffers a stroke and is 'mercifully' killed off by Dibs (Juliette Binoche). She quickly starts a self-imposed reproduction project, perhaps as a penance for murdering her husband and children back on Earth. Sexual intercourse between crew members is banned, so she collects semen from the male members of the crew, who masturbate in the small compartment they call 'the box.' Due to exposure to high-levels of cosmic radiation, the semen samples prove useless when Dibs inseminates the female crew members. Elektra (Gloria Obianyo), the only astronaut who does get pregnant, dies along with her newborn baby.

Dibs becomes increasingly keen to obtain the 'strong genes' that Monte carries, but he refuses to go into the box and rejects her sexual advances.

Sexual frustration also gets to Ettore (Ewan Mitchell) who tries

to rape Boyse (Mia Goth) but is finally beaten away by Monte. Dibs gives additional sedatives to the crew to keep them from raping and/or killing each other, and also uses drugs to knock out Monte so that she can stealthily collect his semen.

All this rape, murder and at least a couple of suicides is pretty dramatic, but the action unfolds at a slow pace, as if through an hallucinogenic haze. In contrast to violence and death, there are some touching moments, like those between Monte and the baby Willow (when she finally stops crying) as he feeds and nurtures her in the ailing spaceship.

Frustratingly, we only get odd clues and glimpses of the motives and character of the crew who have swapped prison on Earth for this one-way journey to who knows where. There are Biblical connotations – the ship's garden might represent the Garden of Eden, which would make Dibs Eve and Monte Adam. Dibs also represents the mad scientist, a female version of Dr Frankenstein, recklessly trying to create life at all costs. Director Claire Denis states that Dibs is akin to the Greek mythological figure Medea, who kills her children and is skilful at manipulating men, and that Monte relates to a figure like Percival in Arthurian legend; perhaps the black hole is the Holy Grail.

Denis creates echoes of the masterpieces of SF cinema like *2001* and *Solaris*; in particular, the opening shots of the spaceship's beautiful garden are reminiscent of the eco-domes in Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running*. Unlike them, or glossy Hollywood SF, *High Life* does not celebrate technology; indeed the spacecraft is a sparse industrial shell. There are no laser-zapping pyrotechnics or flashy sound effects either – at best the odd bleep of a doorway opening and some nice views of outer space.

Overall, this is a complex, multi-layered and sometimes confusing exposition of the human condition that draws you mercilessly into the narrative like a powerful black hole.

Nigel Watson



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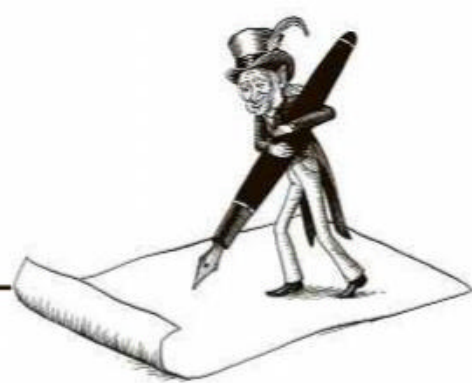
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Catalan Christmas

Having lived in Barcelona for the last 10 years, I was delighted to see Hunt Emerson give the Catalan Christmas the attention it deserves [FT387:79]. My younger child still believes in the *tio* (the pooing log) and we feed it from 1 December, although perhaps not so lavishly. I would like to add two details. Firstly Catalans are known for their thrift and would never chuck a well crafted *tio* on the fire. Instead, we wrap it up and put it away to gather strength for the following year. Also, the Catalan obsession with poo doesn't end there: every nativity scene (including the live action ones!) has a *caganer*, a person having a poo in the corner. If you are a Catalan public figure, you can be said to have really arrived when you appear as a model *caganer* on the Christmas stalls.

Feliç nadal.

Ian Threadgill

By email

Shaman's curse

Nils Erik Grande wrote that a "rational distance" must be kept when evaluating a Sami legend describing application of virgins' faeces on the inner seams of a sailing ship to ward off a shaman's curse that blew it off course [FT381:74]. The reason given is that no virgin maidens would be available due to the historical belief that women on board a ship bring bad luck.

However, boys and men also start out as virgins. I feel certain that a sensible Sami skipper who counted on the efficacy of virgin poo as a prophylactic against cursed wind currents would have the foresight to ensure that at least one cabin boy remained unbuggered in case of emergency.

ML Tanner

Woking, Surrey

Egyptian Fun

"Doyle loathed Egypt, which he regarded as 'contemptible' and 'emasculated'" ('The Birth of The Egyptian Gothic', FT386:33). Really? Now, this refers to a work published in 1892. However,

SIMULACRA CORNER



Recently, Scott Butler took his family to the Sequoia National Park to walk around the giant trees and see the General Sherman. While there, they noticed this sleeping whale (or salamander, or possibly elephant?), and a crocodile sprouting from a fallen tree.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

Conan Doyle also wrote 'The Ring of Thoth' in 1890 (published by *Cornhill* magazine) which portrays – sympathetically – an immortal ancient Egyptian priest, highly educated in the alchemical arts, who is desperate to reunite with his long lost love by finding a "cure" and becoming mortal again, to join her in the Afterlife. Perhaps Doyle decided that he loathed practitioners of the Black Arts, Egyptologists or even animated mummies?

Alan Cassady-Bishop

Filey, North Yorkshire

Mummy's curse

It seems obvious that the so-called Mummy's Curse [FT386:28-36] is complete nonsense and was disregarded by the ancient Egyptians themselves, given that every other tomb so far discovered – besides Tutankhamun – had already been robbed and looted in antiquity, long before they were excavated by archaeologists, ransacked no doubt by the same workers who built the tomb in the first place and who already knew the layout of the tomb and were well aware of its various pitfalls and booby traps. Furthermore, the so-called Curse had little effect on Howard Carter himself, being the first who entered Tutankhamun's tomb, as he lived for another 17 years.

David Keyworth

By email

Hampshire ABCs

On 5 October 2019 I attended an excellent talk on ABC sightings, given by investigator Rick Minter at the Spring Arts Centre in Havant, Hampshire. I was hoping to learn of any recent activity of the Hayling critters that plagued the island back in 1988 (see my coverage, 'Swamp cat fever', FT55:44-46). Havant lies just north of Hayling Island, and the town's museum displays the preserved body of the swamp cat killed by a car in 1988, since re-stuffed after the less than impressive first attempt.

While I was to be disappointed by the lack of recent reports, two statements by members of the audience were surprising. Firstly,

LETTERS

one attendee said she was the niece of Ron Ware, who claimed to have witnessed the swamp cat being killed in 1988. She went on to say that this was incorrect, and in fact her uncle had caused the fatality himself – but for whatever reason declined to admit this at the time. Secondly, a man in the audience stated emphatically that an acquaintance had informed him that the police had contained a lynx on Hayling Bridge in 2004 before it was shot by a marksman. If true, this seems to have been kept quiet, as I'm fairly sure I would have spotted any reference to it in the local news. To date, the last Hayling report I'm aware of was in July 2008, when two women witnessed a jet-black, greyhound-sized cat near North Hayling church.

Nick Maloret
Milton, Hampshire

Faceless Ghosts

While I was staying in a guest house in Peel on the Isle of Man, the new owners, who were renovating the building prior to reopening, told me it had a history of ghost sightings and was part of an internment camp for foreign nationals during WWII. Objects vanished and reappeared in plain sight, doors and windows opened and footsteps were heard on the stairs and landings. When they were sleeping in a basement room, one of them awoke to see a male figure dressed in denim jacket and trousers peer over them for several minutes before fading away. The figure had wavy or curly brown hair, but the face was obscured by a hand.

A similar figure was seen by a biker in a first floor room where he had retreated to escape his friend's snoring. The men were over for the Isle of Man Manx Grand prix motorcycle races in September, and this was their last evening before getting the early boat back to Liverpool. The witness awoke to see a figure dressed in denim jacket and trousers peering over him. As he got up to challenge the figure, it vanished. The room was dark but back-lit by an outside lamp. The corridor lights, visible from under the door, then came on, activated by motion sensors when anyone passed under them. He was so shaken he returned to his snoring friend, staying awake till the morning. My partner reminded me that when we stayed in the same room I had a nightmare about a figure peering over us, dressed this time in a brown overcoat and hat that obscured the face.

John F Hall
Allerton, Liverpool

Manzoni/Manson/Joyce

- Artist Coleen Larkin marketing "Derby turds" at \$200 a throw [FT385:9] references the artistic accomplishments of Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), who famously canned his own poo (*Merda d'Artista*) and sold it, exhibition items now being worth more than their weight in gold. (Tin 54 sold for £182,500 at Christie's in October 2015.) He also signed balloons filled with his own esteemed breath, and signed a naked woman as part of the whole Conceptual Head-

ache.

- With regard to RT Knight's Manson observations [FT385:69], it is seldom acknowledged that Charlie had an interest in Scientology, an E-meter being one of the finds once his home base was

raided. This is coyly referred to in Tori Amos's song "Tear in your Hand", when she sings "I don't believe you're leaving me 'cos me and Charles Manson like the same ice cream." Tori Amos is good friends with author Neil Gaiman, whose father was a prominent PR director for the Scientologists in the UK until his death in 2010. It is said that Tori's song "Past the Mission" was recorded in Sharon Tate's house. A rich vein of conspiriology there...

- I would like to applaud Ewan McVicar's courage in taking *Finnegan's Wake* seriously [FT385:70]: I joined a Joycean book-club and discussing the tome tore us apart and entirely alienated us from each other and the rest of humanity, such rage does it inculcate.

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Garden massacre

First it was a wing attached to a lump of skinned meat. Next a wing attached to a leg. Then a head, followed by another, and another, all torn, rather than neatly severed, from the bodies. Birds... followed by rats. Four, five... 24. In all the previous years combined, the total number of dead birds and rats could not have exceeded 20, but in two weeks the house and garden became a monstrous mortuary, the aftermath of mass slaughter. It's not the cat; sure, he brings some in as trophies, but that's where his role begins and ends. Someone, or something, is responsible.

Stefan Badham
Portsmouth, Hampshire

Mini aliens

Mary Worrall wonders if "she dreamed" about once seeing a UK TV show involving communication with aliens approaching Earth, neither group realising that the aliens are (in Earth terms) so tiny that their ship, on landing, is drowned in a small puddle [FT385:70].

This is clearly an adaptation of Katherine MacLean's classic SF short story 'Pictures Don't Lie', first published in the

August 1951 issue of *Galaxy Science Fiction*, often anthologised, and frequently adapted to other media. Wikipedia notes one such adaptation appeared on 11 August 1962 in the UK on the TV series *Out Of This World* (though sadly, like virtually all episodes of that series, it hasn't survived). A 1956 radio adaptation by the US series *X Minus One* can, however, be heard on various sites on the Internet; there was also an EC comic story version (with some liberties taken) in *Weird Science* #12 (March/April 1952). Author MacLean, incidentally, died only recently – 1 September 2019 – at the age of 94.

Dennis Lien
Minneapolis, Minnesota

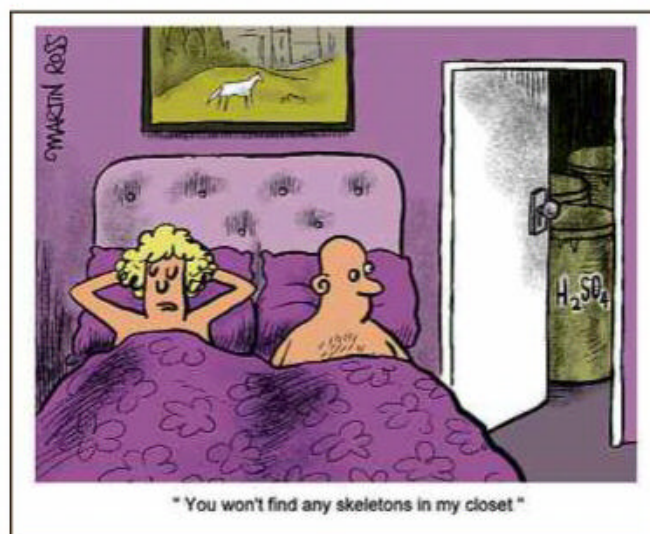
Mary Worrall was right about the "late night TV programme of the 1960s" concerning worms and miniature aliens, landing on a rain soaked runway. It was part of a series of science fiction stories, hosted by Boris Karloff, including this one and a PK Dick story about an alien humanoid bomb, played by John Carson, in which he exploded once he recognised he wasn't the genuine human.

Tony Sandy
Alness, Ross-shire

Pet threat

Regarding the anti-vaxxers movement [FT384:12-13], I'd like to relate my alarming recent experience of its impact on pets. Over the past two years, we've been looking into re-homing kittens. The last time we did this was 13 years ago, when the experience was much more straightforward. However, this time we have had no fewer than five desperately ill kittens in our 'quarantine' room over the past 18 months, acquired, variously, from very large and well known charities, small private charities and a highly recommended private breeder. All of them had to go back to their original homes because we have older, healthy cats that we were unwilling to expose to communicable diseases.

We had our vets run tests on them. It's not exhaustive research by a long way, but it's a reasonable random sample frame. The





poor things were suffering from, variously, herpesvirus (cat ‘flu), calicivirus (another respiratory illness that causes painful ulceration of the tongue and eyes), and giardia (an intestinal parasite). The first two viruses are in the routine inoculations that vets recommend are given at roughly eight weeks and then a booster at 12 weeks, and thereafter annually. These routine vaccinations also protect against panleukopenia, which kills off white blood cells (closely related to dog parvovirus), FeLV (feline leukemia) and FIV (the cat version of HIV).

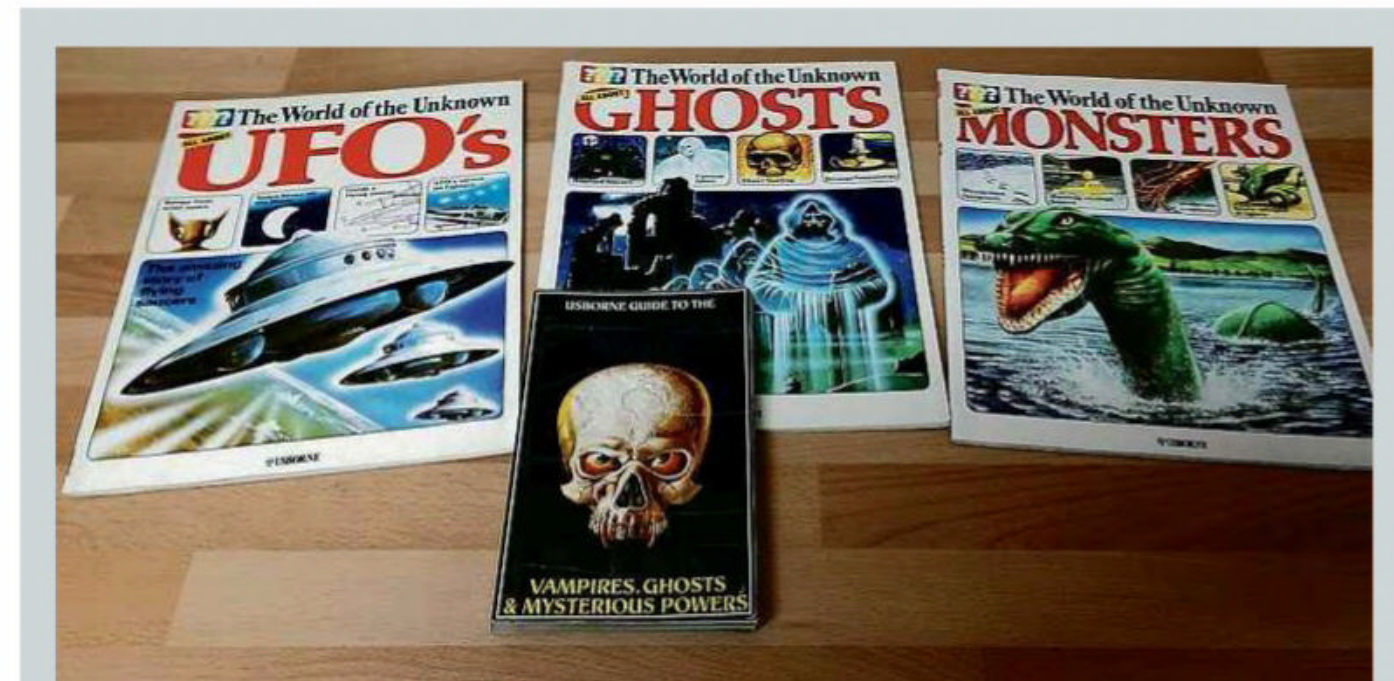
Kittens are particularly sensitive to any communicable disease; but if they and their cattery mates had been fully vaccinated, it’s highly unlikely that they would have developed any of these illnesses, certainly not to the extent of displaying the clinical signs – for example breathing difficulties, fever and lethargy – that we witnessed. These unprotected cats risk dangerous secondary infections (which two of these already had: namely *mycoplasma felis*), losing an eye to cat ‘flu and continually ‘shedding’ the virus in future as a carrier, not to mention a compromised immune system for life.

Our vets confirmed that they had indeed seen a rise in the instances of these preventable illnesses over the last few years. Yet one member of the public that I spoke to when enquiring about a private kitten sale elaborated on the demonstrable lack of the words ‘fully vaccinated’ in about 90% of adverts. When I asked if her 11-month-old kittens had received their first vaccinations, she replied: “No, I don’t believe in giving little kittens a small bit of a deadly disease. Did you know that’s what they do?”

Jo Harlow
Ditton, Kent

Old fortean magic?

I was recently flicking through an old copy of FT from 1979 and noticed the following report written well before JK Rowling took up her pen: “Harry Potter is a keen gardener, so a wooden clothes peg he used to mark a row of seeds in his greenhouse at Bebside, North-



World of the Unknown

Regarding Bob Fischer’s excellent article ‘Where Ghosts Gather’ about the Usborne *World of the Unknown* books [FT385:32-37], readers might like to see the other volumes in the series. I eventually located the three books in my collection, plus the Usborne *Guide to the World of the Supernatural* – ‘Vampires,

Ghosts & Mysterious Powers’.
Richard Watts
Wool, Dorset

There are certain events you can recall down to the tiniest detail no matter how long ago they were, such as your first football match or first kiss. Reading about the Usborne *Ghosts* book brought back many vivid memories and prompted me to get my copy out a box in my loft. Why hide

it away? Even now my pulse quickens and my mouth goes dry when I think about it. Just flicking through its pages transports me to the late 1970s and I again become a child in fear. The power of the images and the general tone meant that I have a love – and a terror – of all things paranormal ever since. I can’t thank the author enough.

Chris Jones
Chester

umberland, sympathetically took route and grew four sturdy shoots.” [FT30:14].

Perhaps Harry should have been in Hufflepuff rather than Gryffindor after all?

Carl Bradbury
By email

Lottery and Xmas puddings

- Ted Harrison’s irresistible compendium of National Lottery lore (“The Luck of the Draw,” FT386:44-47) compels me to admit that while I frequently buy lottery tickets in the US, I can claim no contribution to any “mass psychic effects,” because I opt for random numbers and never glance at them until after the drawing. Maybe I should work harder. Harrison’s article also reminded me of my wife’s late Uncle Pat Sartin, who delighted in tracking the sorry fates of lottery winners – their lawsuits

and arrests, divorces and public embarrassments, miseries and early deaths. Pat’s *schadenfreude* was aimed at a biased sample, of course, *happy* lottery winners not tending to generate headlines, but there’s no denying the cautionary power of his favourite example, Powerball winner Jack Whittaker of Jumping Branch, West Virginia, whose travails were detailed in *The Washington Post Magazine* in 2005 (now online). Pat especially liked that Whittaker carried \$500,000 in cash to a strip club – the Pink Pony in Cross Lanes, which awarded \$50 to Amateur Night contestants – where it was, of course, stolen.

- Lisa Gledhill’s description of the fortune-telling game involving silver coins in Christmas puddings (“Stir it up,” FT386:55) reminded me of the famous scene in *The Great Dictator* (1940), in which Chaplin as the Jewish barber and four other men glumly eat their puddings, for

fear of spooning up the gold coin that will doom the recipient to a suicide mission. In fact, thanks to Paulette Goddard’s sabotage, *each* pudding has a gold coin, and as each is covertly passed to the next diner upon discovery, Chaplin winds up with all of them. Was this scene partially inspired by the Christmas traditions of Chaplin’s London boyhood? In any case, the Yuletide association adds one more layer to an already complex, ironic sequence.

- Finally, what I most want to know about the Bangkok traveller’s experience (“Haunted Hotel,” FT387:74) is whether the ghost *drank* the proffered Fanta. We apparently are told only that the guest, in the night, “heard the sound of something like glass tinkling.” Sounds aside, was the Fanta still there in the morning? Oh, well. Trip Advisor posts always leave *something* out.

Prof Andy Duncan
Frostburg, Maryland

LETTERS

Versailles music

As the author of the overview of the ‘Ghosts of Versailles’ article [FT278:30-35] I enjoyed Roger Morgan’s letter about the music apparently heard by Eleanor Jourdain [FT385:70-71]. I’ll leave the technical answers to his music question to others, but his letter prompted me to bring up a couple of wider related points.

First, it’s worth emphasising Mr Morgan’s assertion that Jourdain’s apparent hearing of the music didn’t occur on the (in) famous initial visit of Jourdain and Annie Moberley to Versailles in August 1901. Rather, it was when Jourdain returned alone some six months later. And although on that occasion she couldn’t match the gardens with the antiquated scenes she and her friend had seen previously, she did indeed still encounter a number of aspects she considered strange, including hearing the odd music.

Even for those who believe some sort of time slip might have happened on the original 1901 visit, this second visit makes that interpretation arguably harder to accept, given that we need to believe pretty much the same thing could happen both on a completely separate occasion, and that it could happen in a far less clean way (for example with the gardens now seeming to be contemporary in appearance rather than from the late 18th century). By the time the two women returned together to Versailles in 1904, all seemed to be back to early 20th century normality.

The letter notes three possibilities about the music: a genuinely psychical experience; an actual band; or an hallucination constructed by her subconscious. A number of researchers have posited it could indeed have been a real band (and potentially not in any strange pitch, a filter added consciously or not by Miss Jourdain). Although Jourdain’s research indicated that no bands were officially playing in the park on that day, it seems quite possible that a military band could have been playing *outside* its formal



boundaries. Various writers have proposed this, and Mark Lamont in his interesting book *The Mysterious Paths of Versailles* includes a postcard showing French military activity around the park in the 1900s.

As for the idea that the music could have been somehow constructed by Jourdain’s subconscious, psychical researcher Ian Parrott, author of the book about this music that Mr Morgan cites, suggests the source of music could have been from “recollections of her life”. And other researchers have pointed out similarities between the music and a contemporary (i.e. late 19th century) hymn, linking this to the fact that Jourdain’s father was a clergyman. Moreover, Lucille Iremonger in her seminal work on the case (*The Ghosts of Versailles*) notes a fair amount of evidence that Jourdain had from a young age a tendency to “externalise an eighteenth century background” and that at least one repetitive example of this involved music: apparently as a young girl Jourdain had a recurring dream where she was in an 18th century long room playing the piano or harpsichord, always the same piece. Eventually she found that once she woke she could recall it and write the notes down. It’s an interesting example connecting Jourdain to an ongoing and meaningful dream that included both repetitive older music and a clear 18th century background. There is no evidence I know of that suggests as a child that Jourdain equated the above experience with some sort of time slip rather than simply dreaming.

What Jourdain actually wrote about the music is that “the pitch of the band was lower than usual”. It seems to me that although this may have been a technical musical observation, it could also have been a way to convey a *feeling* of something unexpected and odd. Her mentioning strange music prompts us to imagine what it might have been like, and helps us recreate the otherworldly nature of the scene, in part by layering over it our own otherworldly soundtrack. It’s not unusual for music to be associated with reports of psychical experiences, a point leveraged by moviemakers and theatre directors who often add some strange music (maybe of a lower pitch than usual) to add to the atmosphere of a spooky tale. Many FT readers will instantly recall the ‘strange’ BAFTA winning theme tune to the TV show *Tales of the Unexpected*, scored by Ron Grainer. That theme is inextricably linked to high strangeness for many of us. The music in the Versailles case is frequently mentioned as ‘ghostly’ or ‘spooky’ or ‘weird’. It’s as if the supposed existence of the music Jourdain heard helps to create an additional level of oddness as we recall the incident.

Interestingly, music and the Versailles incident came full circle in 1980 when the Metropolitan Opera in New York commissioned an opera set in Versailles, featuring the ghost of Marie Antoinette who is devastated at her own early death.

The music apparently heard by Eleanor Jourdain is just one access point into the Versailles adventure. Some people will always

consider that a genuine psychical event occurred. And even for the more sceptical it’s hard to advocate initial *deliberate* fakery (for example the lack of desired fame is hinted at by the original versions of their book using pseudonyms, and Jourdain’s real name only becoming public after her death). However there is certainly the possibility of the original story having been energetically embellished, however subconsciously, by the two participants as they researched and retrofitted their newfound knowledge into all the nooks and crannies of their visit. Potentially, the addition of the music – on the second, solo trip – could be seen as another stage of this embellishment. This post facto embroidering, perhaps building on tired and lost minds in the original visit, and an enthusiasm to rekindle this initial high strangeness in the second visit, can therefore be seen as a legitimate fourth possibility to add to the Mr Morgan’s posited three noted above.

A final thought: more time has now elapsed *since* the infamous original visit than had passed from the time of Marie Antoinette’s death up until that 1901 ‘adventure’. One way or another, time slips away.

Tom Heywood

By email

Out the window

Alana Cutland’s tragic self-defenestration [FT385:80] has a precedent. In March 1905 Harold Nelson Pillsbury, American chess genius, mnemonical showman and operator of the allegedly haunted chess automaton Ajeeb, tried to batter his way out of a fourth storey window in the Presbyterian Hospital in Philadelphia, where he was recovering from an operation. As he exhibited Herculean strength, it took several nurses to restrain him. The cause of his derangement was the tertiary syphilis that claimed his life the following year (Edward Winter, *Pillsbury’s Torment*, www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/pillsbury.html).

Richard George

St Albans, Hertfordshire

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

Night visitors

My parents divorced when I was six and my mother took me and my three older sisters from our house in Melbourne, Australia, to a series of temporary addresses in Brisbane, her (and our) place of birth. When I was seven, we finally moved into a house. It took my mother a long time to find a place both big enough for all of us and cheap enough for a single mother to afford. It was an old place, a timber 'Queenslander'. I have no idea just how old it was, but there was an old coal burner kitchen that was blocked off from the 'modern' gas kitchen. This meant that the house must have been built at least 50 years earlier, and could have been much older.

As the youngest, I got the smallest room – just big enough for a bed and not much else. From the beginning, I didn't like the place. I don't remember when I realised it was haunted, but I have early memories of closing my eyes before entering rooms, particularly at night. When alone in my room during the day, I saw shadows dancing around the corners of my vision. I got used to it in the end. I was too scared to try and talk to the 'ghosts' – I knew they weren't friendly and were teasing and mocking me. At night, I would sleep with the sheets over my head, too terrified to open my eyes. Occasionally, I would feel them touching me with probing fingers.

One day when I was nine, I was talking to my mother who was watching television, and I entered the hallway leading to my room without closing my eyes first. I looked into my room and saw something that has stayed with me to this day: a man, dressed entirely in black. He was rather ordinary looking – balding, with a narrow strip of hair around the back of his head – but everything else about him was far from ordinary. He was draped in a transparent black veil that covered



his whole body, under which he wore a black tank top. He was bent over, doing something with his hands on the wall. I saw him side-on. He heard me, turned, and stared at me for a whole second. His eyes were bright red, like a modern red LED. He had no expression, but unlike the other shadowy figures I would see during the day, he was completely solid and looked 'human'. Abruptly, and without a sound, he ran directly into the wall and vanished. I was left standing, speechless with terror. I told my mother what I had seen, and she just laughed at me.

I moved from that room shortly after, when my eldest sister moved out, into the room on the other side of the hallway. I was very careful after the incident not to look towards my old room without showing myself first. I never saw the creature again, but the occasional 'touching' continued until we finally left the house in 1977 when I was 11. As an adult, I have been back to look at the outside of the house, but even now I would not be game enough to go inside again.

We moved into another house, after my mother and I had lived in a flat for a year and my sisters had all left home. I reverted to my old habits of closing my eyes before entering a dark room and sleeping under the sheets. Then, after we had been in the new house for a few months, I had some friends around for a sleepover. We all slept together in the lounge.

I awoke in the middle of the night, and felt a peace unlike any I had felt before. It was a calm that went completely through me. I opened my eyes, and saw a woman.

She was standing in the doorway, and dressed in a long white dress that covered her feet, like a bride on a wedding cake. There was a pattern on the dress, but I couldn't make it out. She stood about 5ft (1.5m) tall and had curly, light brown hair. She was looking directly at me, smiling. I looked at her, and smiled back. She was lovely, and I have never felt like that before or since. And then she slowly vanished. I looked at where she had been standing for a few minutes, and went back to sleep, feeling wonderful.

To me it was obvious why she had appeared. I have always believed that she knew what I had gone through over five years in the other house and was telling me that I was safe in 'her' house. It changed my life, and I stopped being frightened. I never saw her again.

Many people will dismiss my experience because of my age at the time. All I can say is that I know that this is how it happened. I was never the sort to imagine events and pass them off as real. I can't explain the events, or the reason for the first house's haunting. Neither my sisters nor my mother saw anything strange in the house, to my knowledge.

Perhaps some of the events

were simply the imaginings of a frightened little boy. Even the woman in white could have been a fragment of a dream, although I don't believe so. But I have no doubt the vision of the man in black was real. I always believed it was a demon, or perhaps a lost soul. I don't know if I really want to know the answer.

Robert Euston

By email

Skinwalker Entity

Here's a link is to a clip of some strange anomalies captured on my 4 Sight Dash Cam just one mile south of the entrance to Skinwalker Ranch on 11 July 2018: <https://vimeo.com/347800383>. My brother and I were investigating the area around Skinwalker Ranch near Fort Duschene, Utah. We were parked at what is known among fellow researchers as the "Southern Vantage". Darkness had just fallen when for just a split second I noticed an amorphous blue image appear and quickly vanish over the hood of my car. It materialised outside the windshield and in front of my brother who was seated on the passenger's side. I believe that purple image in the video (shown above) is what I saw, prompting me to ask my brother to press the Event Button on the dash cam.

I now refer to the purple coloured image as the "Skinwalker Entity". What I saw was definitely blue, and I cannot explain why it appeared purple in the video. This clip also recorded an orange orb emerging from underneath my car. This streaks off into the darkness at a very low angle. The video lasts a little over two minutes and contains other strange anomalies that were not included in the clip. There is an unedited version on my website at <http://www.creepyenounters.com/>. If you have any questions feel free to email me at info@creepyenounters.com

Jay Bradley

By email

Fortean Traveller



119. Going 'out there' in SoCal

The two doctors, **DAVID CLARKE** and Tom Clark (no relation), spent a week on the road in Southern California seeking out UFO contactee cults, quirky museums and modern ghost-hunters.



PHOTOS: DAVID CLARKE

Most people visit Southern California for the sunlit white beaches and Hollywood celebrities. But with a population of well over four million, it's not surprising that there's a whole host of options to interest the Fortean traveller. We set off with our host, Professor Chris Bader – author of *Paranormal America* – to investigate a number of infamous alien visitations, hauntings and as much weird Southern California as we could fit into a week.

We set up a base camp near Professor Bader's office at Chapman University in a quirky little guesthouse called Ruta's Olde Town Inn. With three rooms, as much breakfast as we could eat, and an interesting display of vintage children's toys and ephemera, it was located in something of a ghost hotspot, with a number of haunted houses nearby. On the edge of Anaheim, in Orange County, it was a perfect base to begin to explore SoCal.

And there's the thing. Los Angeles is huge. Its freeways are like spaghetti, its intersections

constant and choked with traffic. It has flyovers that frequently soar into the sky before slamming you down into a NASCAR-like race to the next turn-off. It is also rightly notorious for its poor public transport, so it's worth taking the time to understand both

the Amtrak and Metro systems. Before you plan your schedule, consider whether you'd be better off hiring a car – and steady yourself for a white-knuckle ride.

But once you've gained your bearings, SoCal is hugely rewarding. After a brief visit

to the Church of Scientology bookshop in Santa Ana, we began our trip by visiting The Unarius Academy of Science in El Cajon, a suburb of San Diego and a two hour drive south out of Los Angeles. Unarius is an acronym for the 'Universal Articulate Interdimensional Understanding of Science'. It was founded in 1954 as a kind of galactic consulate by Ernest and Ruth Norman who had built up a small following through their psychic readings and channelled messages from space people (see **FT158:28-33, 271:51-53**). Its purpose is "to advance awareness of the inter-dimensional science of life as based upon principles of fourth-dimensional physics".

Ruth styled herself the Archangel Uriel and after the death of Ernest in 1971 she became the public face of Unarius. Her channelling work stepped up a gear, as did the production of her gowns, and she predicted a mass landing of flying saucers in 2001 on a piece of scrubland near the Unarius headquarters. When this failed to happen, the Unarians concentrated on their past-life channelling, which continued after Ruth's death in 1993. With colourful murals adorning its walls, the World Teaching Centre hosts ongoing workshops designed to help its students



TOP: Distinctive interior design in the Unarius Academy of Science in El Cajon. **ABOVE:** Dinosaurs still walk the Earth at the Creation and Earth History Museum in Santee, where exhibits aim to prove that our planet is only 10,000 years old.



PHOTOS: DAVID CLARKE

ABOVE: The Integratron, built by contactee George Van Tassell in the Mojave Desert. BELOW: These days, you can join other visitors for a 'sound bath' inside the building.

understand the continuity of consciousness. In pioneering a new science of reincarnation, the Unarians use 'past life therapy' to translate those lives into the written word: the likes of Napoleon, Yamamoto, and "the last Inca, Atahualpa" have all been channelled into biographies that can be purchased from the bookstore. But not all past lives are as memorable. When we asked our guide who he had been he said, "Yeah, I was a Russian painter – what's his name? Hell, it doesn't matter!"

For a different sort of religious experience, just a few blocks away in Santee, is the Creation and Earth History Museum. Originally opened by the Institute for Creation Research, its exhibits are largely aimed at proving that the Earth is, in fact, only around 10,000 years old. Among other claims, it provides 'evidence' to suggest that the world was indeed created in just six days, that the Grand Canyon was formed in a matter of weeks, and, perhaps most surprisingly, that dinosaurs were present on Noah's Ark (but, given their size, only young ones were allowed on board). Without any hint of irony, it is suggested that over



a number of generations the dinosaurs later died out because they weren't well adapted to the world after the flood. There's also a surprising assertion that Karl Marx was "(according to some) a Satanist in college", and a diorama that encourages children to sit with a fluffy sacrificial lamb and "reflect on the ultimate sacrifice – Jesus the Lamb of God" in front of a scene that does indeed depict the sacrifice of a lamb.

To continue with our contactee theme, we ventured out into the searing heat of the Mojave Desert to visit The Integratron near the tiny town of Landers, California. This unique circular structure was built by George Van Tassel, a former aircraft mechanic who lived in a house under the Giant Rock – a massive seven story granite boulder – three miles drive away. The subterranean 'house' beneath the rock was excavated by his buddy, German immigrant and prospector Franz Critzer. But during World War II Critzer was suspected of working for the Nazis and was blown up when the dynamite store exploded during a police siege. Van Tassel bought the property in 1947 and opened a café but few people ventured out to this remote



ABOVE: Giant Rock, where Van Tassel once hosted his 'Spacecraft Conventions', drawing crowds of saucer fans eager to meet their Venusian space brothers. **BELOW:** The headquarters of the Aetherius Society, still battling to save humankind.

place before the flying saucer craze arrived in SoCal.

Early in 1953, George Adamski stunned the world with his account of a meeting with the angelic pilot of a 'scout ship' from Venus that landed near Desert Center. Soon afterwards, whilst meditating, Van Tassel began to channel messages from space people and was 'astrally transported' to meet the Council of Seven Lights. From 1953 he hosted annual 'Spacecraft Conventions' in the shade of the Giant Rock that attracted up to 10,000 saucer fans eager to hear the latest wisdom from Ashtar and legions of other entities with unpronounceable names. Adamski and all those who followed him to create what Greg Bishop and Adam Gorightly call the 'Golden Age of Contactees' spoke here at one time or another. During the 1960s, the LSD-soaked desert scene attracted Keith Richards and Gram Parsons, who reportedly tripped out on mushrooms while skywatching at nearby Joshua Tree National Park. But the only evidence of visitors that we could find was UFO graffiti on the remains of an airstrip and some nearby rocks.

Van Tassel claimed the space people taught him a method to rejuvenate the human body; using his new-found knowledge and funds provided by Howard Hughes, he designed and built a cupola-shaped structure that

Van Tassel channelled messages from space

could harness the EMF energy necessary to effectively recharge the cells in our bodies as if they were an electric battery. Unfortunately for Van Tassel, this was not enough to save him from a heart attack in 1978. But his Integratron survived plans

to turn it into a disco and today it is a listed building in the US National Register of Historic Places. Its new owners adapted it to offer 'sound baths' to locals and passing tourists, and the small gift shop stocks a range of flying saucer-themed clothing and trinkets. The ground floor of the Integratron has wall displays on local history and the saucer conventions, plus a small library of UFO books. The leader of the sound bath ceremony makes a number of large quartz drums 'sing' so that they reverberate around the dome-like structure until it produces an all-encompassing

sound. We were invited to climb into the roof space and relax on mats arranged in circles facing the curving walls. Fellow pilgrims were a mixture of young yogis and older dudes and, given the New Age vibe, we were surprised to hear a potted history of 1950s contactee stories before the auditory experience began. We found it impossible not to feel immediately relaxed, so much so that a warning was issued to those prone to snore not to spoil the moment for everyone else. Within seconds of the first low G there was some *very* loud snoring from an unidentified source, but the ambience was ruined only temporarily. Sound baths are popular, so if you want to experience the delights of the Integratron we recommend you book ahead at: <https://www.integratron.com/sound-bath/>. (For more on Van Tassel and Giant Rock see **FT109:50, 118:28-31, 135:14, 238:38-40**)

For those who prefer fortean adventures of the ghostlier kind, SoCal is also home to a large number of haunted houses. Perhaps the most unusual is the *RMS Queen Mary*, now permanently docked at Long Beach. Once the flagship of the Cunard and White Star Line, and a former holder of the Blue Riband, the cruise liner took her maiden voyage in 1936 and remained in service through WWII until 1967, when she was converted into a floating hotel. With such a distinguished past – and 50 people reported to have died on board – perhaps it's not surprising that the vessel has picked up a few ghosts along





DAVID CLARKE

ABOVE: Perhaps the most unusual 'haunted house' in Southern California, the RMS Queen Mary offers regular ghost tours and paranormal investigations.

the way. Indeed, the ship has been voted as one of the top 10 haunted places in the USA and now offers both ghost tours and paranormal investigations. Opting for full immersion, we enjoyed an entertaining evening in the bowels of the ship staring blankly at EMF meters, taking EVP recordings, and generally looking for any sign of ghostly activity. While our host appeared certain that there was 'something' on at least one of the recordings, we were less convinced.

What was undeniable, however, was that two of the security guards were seriously spooked and reported having their own weird experiences while on patrol: one young man in particular clearly believed that he had heard his name being called from behind. His fellow guard, a grandmother who worked in a hospital by day, admitted there were parts of the ship she didn't like venturing into. "There's good ones and there's bad ones," was her summing up of the ship's 'spirit' presences.

Leaving the ghosts of the Queen Mary behind, we took the obligatory trip to Hollywood. But while many people walk up, down, and around Hollywood Boulevard looking for the names of famous stars they might recognise, just around the corner on Afton Place lies the Headquarters of the Aetherius

Society, an international organisation that is dedicated to using and spreading the teachings of advanced extraterrestrial intelligences. Once inside, we admired the immaculately tended flowers and garden, iron gates with a shimmering star-scape engraved into the metalwork and a crystal-ball topped fountain inscribed with the words "Service To Humanity Through Protection". The 'society' or New Religious Movement was founded in the mid-1950s by English contactee George King, a London taxi driver who began his journey as a psychic medium and yoga master. After reading Adamski, he swapped the Great White Brotherhood for the Space People and in 1954, while washing the dishes in his Maida Vale bedsit, a voice announced: "Prepare Yourself! You are to become the voice of Interplanetary Parliament!"

This was the first of hundreds of messages King received from the Cosmic Masters, including an extraterrestrial called 'Aetherius' who, it later emerged, lived on Venus. Over the next 30 years, King would continue to commune with Aetherius and other disembodied entities from Mars, Saturn and elsewhere in our Solar System. On one occasion he was ordered to go alone to a hill in Somerset where he met the Master Jesus, who landed

in a flying saucer. In 1958, King moved his HQ permanently to downtown LA and a number of his followers continue to live out their lives in a small community based around King's former bungalow home. The shop sells Aetherius Society literature and tape recordings of King's channelled messages from the Masters. All these contacts led King to develop his New Age religion to spread enlightenment, selflessness and ongoing action to protect the Earth from a range of threats from outer space and, more recently, climate change. But Greg Bishop notes that in 1997, soon after King's death, the mass suicides of followers of the Heaven's Gate UFO cult in nearby San Diego caused both the Aetherius Society and the Unarians to open up and explain "why they were not all like that bunch". (For more on the Aetherius Society, see FT104:49, 270:38, 271:51-53; for Heaven's Gate, see FT99:4, 32, 100:4, 34-41)

As it happened we chose to visit on a day that most of the congregation were making their way up Mount Baldy, one of the Aetherius Society's Holy Mountains. These are used for ceremonies that store spiritual energy as part of the society's ongoing battle to save us from all kinds of natural disasters. Little did we know that, some 10 days after our visit, SoCal would

be rocked by an earthquake that measured 7.1 on the Richter scale, the largest tremor to strike the region in 20 years. The epicentre of the quake was the town of Ridgecrest, 240km (150 miles) north of Los Angeles – which sparked fears of further devastating quakes along the San Andreas fault line.

Oblivious to the impending threat, we did what all tourists do and went off in search of the Hollywood sign, then hit the six-lane freeway back to Orange before LA's infamous rush-hour began.

Thanks to Chris and Sarah Bader and to Carolyn Waudby. We stayed at Ruta's Old Town Inn at Orange: www.rutasoldtowninn.com/ and flew to LA by Virgin Atlantic. Ghost Tours of the RMS Queen Mary can be booked online at: www.queenmary.com/tours/tours-exhibits/haunted-encounters/

FURTHER READING/WATCHING

Adam Gorightly and Greg Bishop, *'A' is for Adamski: The Golden Age of UFO Contactees* (Gorightly Press, 2018)

Farewell, Good Brothers (Dir: Robert Stone, 1998)

♦ DR DAVID CLARKE is a Principal Research Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University, a consultant for The National Archives UFO project and a regular contributor to FT.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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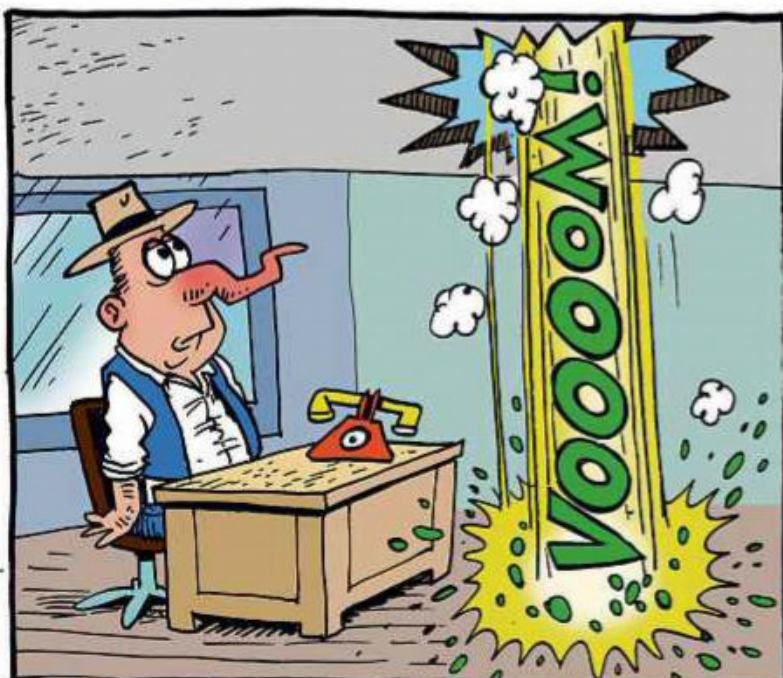
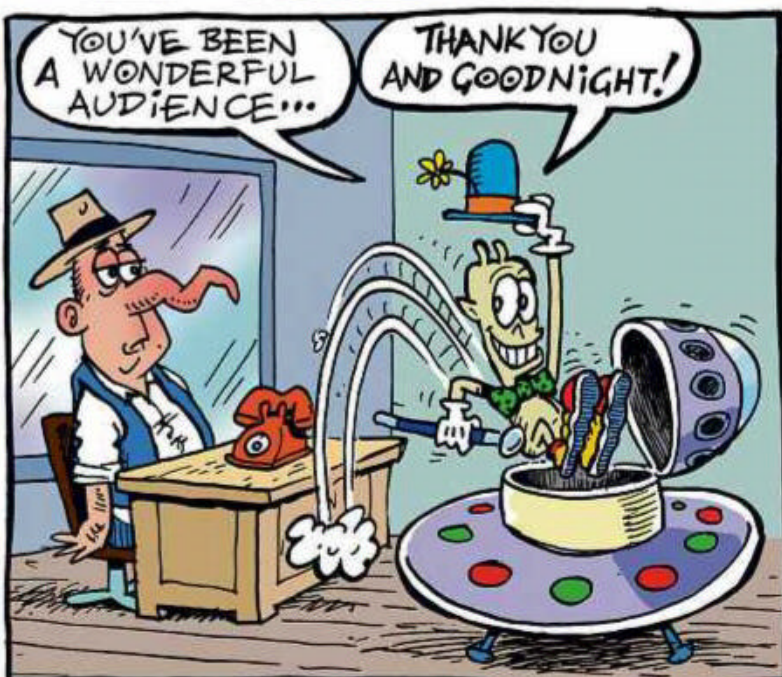
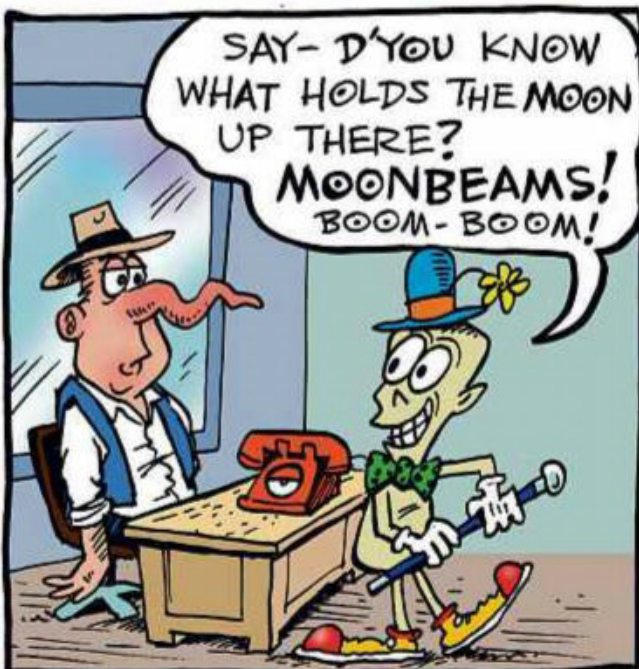
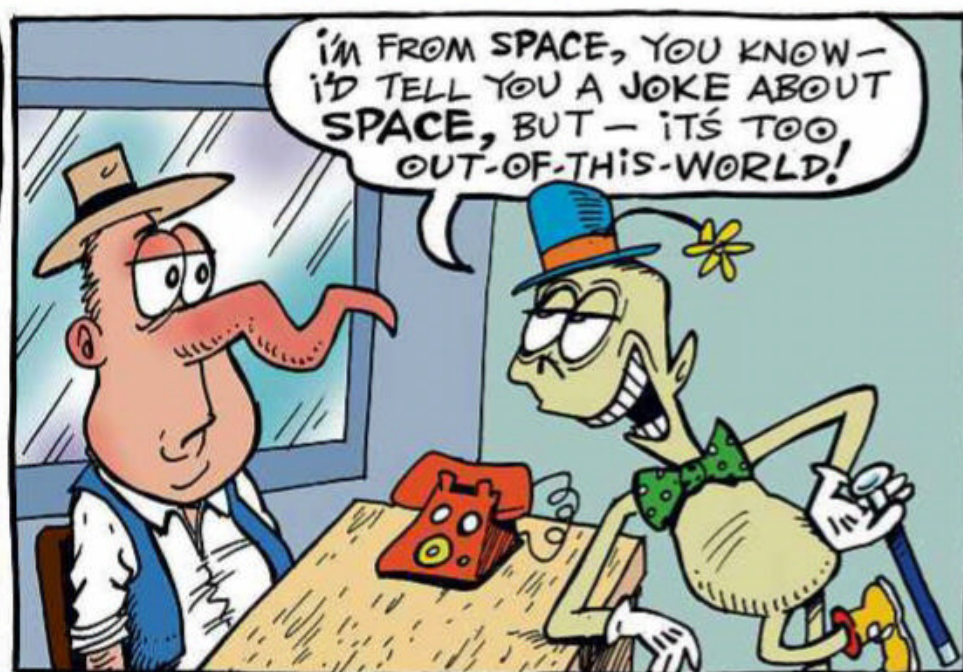
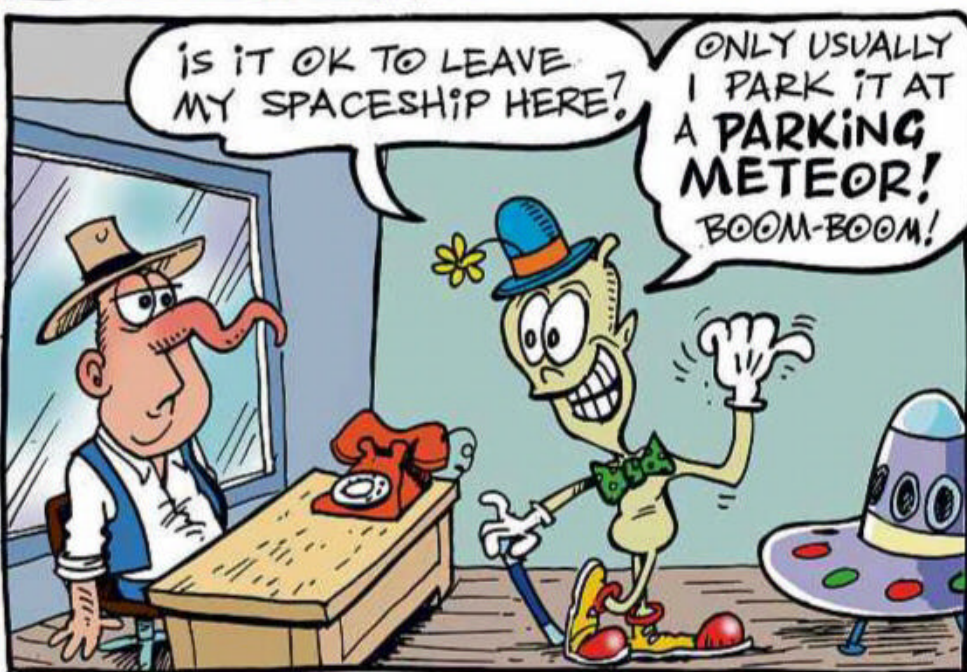
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FORTEAN TIMES 389

ON SALE 30 JAN 2020

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Four members of the same family drowned at Pambar Dam in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu on 6 October after slipping into the water while trying to take a selfie. Newlywed bride V Nivedha, 20, died alongside family members Sneha, 22, Kanniga, 20, and Santosh, 14, who was the first to slip into the water. Her husband, G Perumalsamy, 25, survived and managed to save his 15-year-old sister Yuvarani. Some 259 people worldwide died while taking selfies from October 2011 to November 2017, according to a study published in India's *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* in 2018. They found that the most selfie deaths occurred in India, followed by Russia, the US and Pakistan. Most of the victims – around 72 per cent – were men and under the age of 30. India accounted for more than half the global total, with 159 reported selfie deaths since 2011. [CNN] 9 Oct 2019.

A woman was killed on 29 September when the portable lavatory she was sitting on at a building site in Florida exploded. Investigators in decontamination suits waded through the debris to locate the woman's charred remains. *Sun*, 30 Sept 2019.

A would-be thief aged 37 killed himself with a homemade bomb as he tried to hack an ATM in the Russian city of Cherepovets, north of Moscow. The blast, caught on CCTV, was so strong that it blew a metal door 35ft (12m) towards the road. Images of the damage show the casing used to protect ATM users from the elements completely blown off its hinges and the metal panelling outside warped from the blast. Detectives were searching for an accomplice who escaped. No money was missing from the cash machine. *dailymail.co.uk*, 9 Oct 2019.

A 25-year-old man who died from a gunshot wound outside a branch of Lloyd's Bank in Sydenham, southeast London, on 8 September apparently shot himself by accident. "He came to shoot someone else," said an onlooker, "but he ended up shooting himself. The bullet bounced off a car window. You can see on the window where the bullet bounced off. After it happened, the boy he came to shoot stood there filming him." *D.Star*, 9 Sept; *D.Mail*, 10 Sept 2019.

The Unite union demanded an urgent health probe into the massive Crossrail project after three workers died in their sleep. The deaths – in June and on 28 and 30 September – involved contractors working deep underground at Bond Street station in central London. All three were thought to be the result of heart attacks. *D.Mirror*, 5 Oct 2019.

William Blunsdon killed his 77-year-old grandmother with a bayonet after believing she had been replaced by a witch. Dorothy Bowyer was stabbed to death at her home in the Peak District village of Buxworth in Derbyshire on 14 February. The family's ex-mountain rescue dog was also killed. Blunsdon had lived at the address for about 18 months. *D.Telegraph*, 6 Aug 2019.

Sixteen people were sentenced to death on 24 October for burning alive a Bangladeshi teenager who refused to withdraw sexual assault charges against the principal of her rural Islamic seminary. Nusrat Jahan Rafi was doused in kerosene and set on fire last April. *D.Telegraph*, 25 Oct 2019.

A British fisherman became the first person in more than 80 years to die from a sea snake bite in Australia. Harry Evens, 23, from Pool in Dorset, was bitten by the 3ft (90cm) creature as he inspected a net while working on a trawler in October 2018. He initially suffered no ill effects before "rapidly deteriorating" and falling unconscious. *Metro*, *Sun*, 2 Oct 2019.

A Franco-Canadian man died after being attacked by a grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos ssp*) on 15 August. Julien Gauthier, a 44-year-old musician, was travelling along the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories, a largely isolated area accessible only by sea or air, with the aim of recording sounds of nature for a musical project. Camille Toscani, a biologist who had been travelling with him and raised the alert, said he had been dragged away by the bear in the middle of the night. Unprovoked grizzly bear attacks are very rare. Last year, Gauthier spent five months recording sounds in the Kerguelen Islands in Antarctica, and the result of that trip was a piece called *Symphonie australe* (Southern Symphony), which was broadcast on French radio. *BBC News*, 21 Aug 2019.

Cosy Crime Pays For Indy Author

Lynn Florkiewicz's dream of being a writer began when she was just six years old, but it had to sit on the back-burner until, at the age of 45, she took a creative writing course with The Writers Bureau, and started out on a whole new adventure...



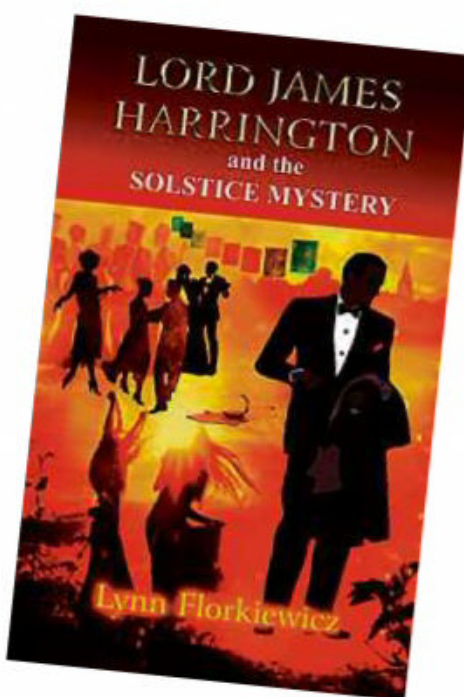
Lynn Florkiewicz

Avid reading as a child laid the foundation for Lynn's love of mystery and crime stories, and she always imagined that one day she'd write her own. When she grew up though, marriage and a promising career as a singer/songwriter on the British and American folk circuits gave her little time to pursue writing until, after a bout of particularly debilitating illness, she decided it was time to bring it to the fore.

Lynn enrolled on The Writers Bureau's Creative Writing Course back in 2001. She worked steadily through its 20 tutor-marked assignments, earning her course fees back from published work and getting placed/highly commended in several writing competitions along the way. Confidence thoroughly boosted, she then decided to try writing a children's adventure story - *The Quest for the Crystal Skulls*, of which, BBC Springwatch's Michaela Strachen said: 'There are many ways to create awareness about what we're doing to planet Earth, I found this an incredibly powerful and compelling one. I read it in one go.' (*The Quest for the Crystal Skulls* is available from Amazon and Penpress Partnership Book Publishing).

Inspired by a long-time love of cosy crime (Agatha Christie, Carola Dunn etc), Lynn's next move was to follow her

childhood dream and create her own murder-mystery series. And so it was that Lord James Harrington, country landowner, ex-racing driver and amateur sleuth, was born. When her first whodunit, *The Winter Mystery*, was launched on Kindle it received a plethora of five-star reviews from cosy crime fans, and that was all the encouragement Lynn needed to write more.



Five years on, and Lord James Harrington is a well-established character with his name on nine book covers. Lynn is already in the process of writing a tenth, with plans to release a new mystery every year. The books are all available from Amazon in Kindle, print and audio format, as well

as from Lord Harrington's very own website: www.lordjamesharrington.com.

'I've created a world that I adore and I love to slip into that imaginary community and meet up with my characters,' says Lynn. 'I am not a literary writer. I'm not here to change the world or make you think, I want to entertain people and, from the feedback I've received, I tick that box.'

Recently, Lord James Harrington was picked-up by Magna Publishing (part of Ulverscroft). They intend to release the whole series in audio and large print formats, and already, the American Audio File Magazine has awarded the first of these recordings with an Earphone Audio Award.

Lynn is just one of many Writers Bureau students who have found their way to publishing success. So if you harbour a dream to write, they can help. Their courses provide students with a professional writer as a personal tutor and cover all types of writing, as well as teaching the business side of being an author. To request free details, contact The Writers Bureau at: www.writersbureau.com or call – 0800 856 2008. Quote ATT19

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